air catcher

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air catcher

by feralratdad

Summary

"I'm not- you kill yourself, Sae!" Shidou exclaims. "You kill yourself today, and I'm supposed to fix it! All of a sudden I have to care about you again, and I'm just not fucking ready!"
Sae's eyes widen, as if he's taken aback. "What are you talking about?" he asks defensively. "I-"
"I'm just not ready," Shidou says lamely. "I know it makes me selfish, but I can't do it today. I'm sorry, Sae. I'll see you in the next loop."

Sae Itoshi jumps off his balcony, and now it's Ryusei Shidou's problem. Shidou finds himself trapped in a timeloop where it appears the end goal is to save Sae's life, but is it possible for the two to heal after a world of hurt?

Notes

hello hi ^-^ please be advised this fic is heavily centered around a suicide and thus will contain themes of depression. anyways enjoy my timeloop ryusae <3

i dont fall slow like i used to

The day Sae Itoshi takes a swan dive off a roof, Ryusei Shidou is in his bedroom, music blasting as he mindlessly scrolls through Twitter and checks his indirects. Plenty of people are still talking about his hat trick at their latest game, and he eats the attention up like a starving animal.

Ryusei Shidou is the future of Japanese soccer!!

this is the pinnacle of the Blue Lock program

god what i wouldn't give to have ryusei shidou do a hat trick up my ass

RYUSEI SHIDOU HAT TRICK THATS MY GOAT

if I was sandwiched between oliver aiku and ryusei shidou I would die happy

His phone buzzes, a text notification popping up. Shidou scowls. He doesn't like having his scrolling time interrupted, but it's from Charles, so he rolls onto his stomach and checks the text.

Demon Jr: dude did you see

Ryusei Shidou: see what???

Demon Jr: oh shit

Demon Jr: I can't be the one to say it

Demon Jr: check like literally any media outlet rn

Demon Jr: sorry

With a quizzical frown, Shidou moves from his indirects to instead check the trending page. To his shock, he sees one name at the very top: Sae Itoshi. Just reading it puts a bad taste in his mouth, ties a knot in his stomach. Against his better judgement, he clicks it.

Former Re Al Midfielder Sae Itoshi Dead at 21

Re Al Midfielder Sae Itoshi's Suicide Confirmed

The Crown of Japanese Soccer Sae Itoshi Found Dead

When Fame Goes Wrong: the tragic tale of Sae Itoshi

With each passing headline, Shidou feels something tighten in his chest. Almost frantic now, he scrolls down further, bombarded with posts from fans.

SAE JUMPED THIS IS MY 9/11

wait did sae acc jump or is oomf lying on the timeline again

why the hell sae itoshi think we gaf about him 😭 drama queen

this is what happens when you leave behind all your prospects 💀 #saeitoshi

oomfs don't jump me (lol) for this but lowkey sae serving face even as a corpse....

SAE DEAD HAS ANYONE HEARD FROM RIN

me when I'm at an attention seeking contest but my opponent is sae itoshi

Each tweet sends Shidou further and further downspiraling until he feels like he can't breathe. Clutching his phone in shaking hands, he's only brought out of the darkness by a flood of incoming messages.

Demon Jr: ryu you okay??

21 messages from: Blue Lock Survivors

5 messages from: My PxG family!!!

12 message from: Japan U20 GOATS

Overwhelmed, Shidou turns off his phone and lets it fall to the ground. He stares up at the ceiling, dread pooling into his heart, and wonders how things could have ever ended up like this.

Somehow, life moves on, and the day ends.

-*-

Shidou wakes up in a cold sweat.

The first thing he does is check his phone. November 11th, 7:23 AM. Hadn't that just been yesterday? But as he checks his messages, he finds no unread notifications. Nothing from Charles about bad news.

Still, he opens Google just in case. A quick search: *Sae Itoshi.* Way to look like a desperate ex. Still, no new headlines. The most recent ones are about his retirement months ago.

Shidou can't help but bark out a shaky laugh. Wow, okay. The entire situation is so humorous, he almost wants to text Rin. *Hey Rinrin, I had a dream last night your brother killed himself.* What a joke.

As he gets up and moves, reality sinks in, and the unsettled feeling lingering over his bones washes away with the water from his sink. Shidou splashes his face, does his morning

skincare, and gets dressed for the day. He has practice to get to, actual things to worry about. He doesn't have time for things like Sae Itoshi.

The day passes by. Practice goes smoothly. Shidou laughs and jokes around with the guys- just like in his dream. Exactly like it, even. He says his farewells and heads back home. One cold shower later, he's in the kitchen making himself lunch- same thing he made in his dream. All thoughts of Sae are long gone from his head, banished as they should be. If anything, Sae was the demon, not him. Impossible to get rid of, always haunting his life no matter how much time passed.

Shidou makes it to the gym. He hadn't gone in his dream, but he feels so frazzled, he works it into his schedule. After his workout, he has a second cold shower. Time to spend the rest of the day relaxing.

He hops on his phone, opening Twitter. Time to check his indirects. After all the praise he'd received in his dream, he was hoping for some in real life too.

Ryusei Shidou is the future of Japanese soccer!!

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RYUSEI SHIDOU HAT TRICK THATS MY GOAT

if I was sandwiched between oliver aiku and ryusei shidou I would die happy

His phone buzzes. Shidou checks the message. It's from- Charles.

Demon Jr: dude did you see

Shidou's heart is already sinking, because deep down, he knows already. Knows exactly where this is going. He saw it play out once already, and here it was again.

Shakily, he opens Twitter and checks the trending tab.

Sae Itoshi.

Trending with:

Suicide.

Shidou hurls his phone at the wall, rushes to the bathroom, and wretches his guts up.

-*-

Shidou wakes up. Checks his phone. November 11th, 7:23 AM. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Japan U20 GOATS

Ryusei Shidou: have you guys ever seen Groundhog Day? Or happy death day?

Sendou: omg I love happy death day

Cap: likely thing for you to like

Sendou: ?

Rinrin: happy death day is okay.

Ryusei Shidou: ok glad we're all educated on the subject matter

Isagi: what's up shidou??

Ryusei Shidou: have you guys ever felt like the same day is repeating? like, this is the third time you've woken up and it's November 11th?

Purple Bun: what the hell, sure.

Ryusei Shidou: no I'm being so serious

Rinrin: keep your lukewarm thoughts to yourself.

Ryusei Shidou: no I'm telling you something crazy happens today

Rinrin: yeah? like what?

Shidou's fingers stall over the keyboard.

Ryusei Shidou: nahhhh I'm just playing

Rinrin: stop wasting my time.

Shidou makes breakfast while he contemplates what the hell to do. Okay, maybe it was a fluke. A dream inside a dream. Yeah, sure, he should just let this all play out again. This couldn't be real. Time loops aren't real. Especially not a time loop where he's trapped reliving the day his ex kills himself.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"What's up?" Aiku asks during break. Shidou is sitting on the bench, chugging down his water bottle. "You seem off today."

"Nothing," Shidou replies, forcing a grin. "Just a bit out of it, that's all."

"Everyone's raving about your hat trick on Twitter," Aiku says. "Check it out if you need a confidence boost."

"Thanks. Will do."

"You're playing lukewarm." Rin's joined them, a towel slung around his neck. "Keep up or it'll piss me off."

Three years changed a lot of things. Rin and Shidou's comparability was better than it used to, as was their relationship. When Shidou had left PxG to rejoin the U20 team, initially, he and Rin had been on hostile terms. Somehow, they'd found their balance. Maybe that was just part of growing up.

Suddenly, Shidou feels ill. Rin's face looks so much like Sae's. They have the same eyes, same underlashes.

Your brother's going to kill himself today.

Shidou can't bring himself to say it.

After practice, he refreshes Twitter like a crazy person. It pays off. This time, he's the first to see the trending.

Sae Itoshi

Suicide

This time, Shidou pulls up an article. He has to know this time. Maybe somehow, it would change things.

He jumped. Sae jumped. Right off his apartment balcony. The authorities found him pretty quick. It happened around 4:30 PM, they said. Only took about an hour after that for the media to find out and spread the news like wildfire.

Shidou cries that night. Ugly tears, staining his pillow. He heaves sob after sob until he can't catch his breath anymore.

-*-

Shidou wakes up. November 11th, 7:23 AM. He picks up his phone and calls a number he swore he'd never call again.

The phone rings. No one picks up.

Shidou tries calling again. Again and again. Still, no answer. Maybe he's still asleep. No, what a dumb thought- Sae had always been a morning person.

Sae had also famously hated phone calls.

He texts instead.

Ryusei Shidou: hey I know it's been a while but can you please call me it's an emergency

No response. Fine, Shidou just has to resort to desperate measures.

Ryusei Shidou: it's about Rin it's rlly bad

His phone is ringing in almost an instant. Shidou feels only a small shred of guilt.

"Hello?" the voice on the other end is clipped. Short. *"Where's Rin?"*

"He's, uh, somewhere," Shidou says. "Please don't hang up."

"...you're sick."

The line clicks. *Fuck.*

Ryusei Shidou: sae please I'm sorry

Ryusei Shidou: I need to talk to you

Ryusei Shidou: god please sae quit being so stubborn

Trending on Twitter today:

Sae Itoshi

Suicide

-*-

November 11th. 7:23 AM.

Ryusei Shidou: sae please call me it's about rin

His phone rings.

"Hello?" So much coldness in that voice. *"Where's Rin?"*

"We're on our way to the hospital," Shidou says, "I need you to meet us there."

"What the hell happened?!"

"We were, uh, getting some early practice in and his leg like- just totally snapped. Yeah, it's really gruesome. He really needs you."

"...fine. Send the address. I'll be there."

Click.

It's a cool day. Shidou stands in front of the hospital, hands in the pockets of his jacket. His heart is hammering in his chest, a fear he hasn't felt in- well, ever. He has this urge to just start pacing, to wear a hole in the sidewalk.

A figure in a burgundy jacket is striding toward him, crimson hair disheveled. Shidou's heart leaps as he locks gazes with Sae Itoshi. There are dark circles under the former genius' eyes. His face seems worn, almost like a thread about to snap. The bright turquoise of his eyes have lost their sparkle. They've dulled now, void of life.

Still, it's Sae. It's Sae, and Shidou doesn't know what to say.

"Where's Rin?" Sae asks without greeting.

"You're here," is all Shidou can manage.

Sae's lip curls in a snarl. "I'm not a *monster* . Where is he?"

"Inside. He- uh, the doctors said they need some time alone."

"Then I'll wait inside."

"Wait." Shidou reaches out a hand, grabbing onto his arm. Here he was, Sae Itoshi. Alive and breathing, unlike the previous few days- loops? And what was Shidou supposed to do now? "Can I... get you a coffee?"

Sae jerks away from him, as if his touch burned. "I'm here for my brother," he snaps, " *You* can leave now."

Shidou's eyes spark with tears against his own wishes. Fuck, what is he supposed to do? "Sae-chan," he croaks out.

Sae flinches like he'd been struck. "Don't call me that."

"Are you okay?" Shidou blurts.

The former genius regards him with disdain. "I said leave."

"If I leave, you're going to jump, aren't you?" Shidou asks, and Sae freezes in place. "I've seen it. I've lived it. Why? I don't know. I guess I'm supposed to try to stop it. Ridiculous, right? Me, of all people, with your life in my hands?" He releases a bitter chuckle, dragging a hand through his hair. "I never wanted to see you again, and now we're here."

"What are you going on about?" Sae hisses.

"Rin's fine. He's not in the hospital. I- I only said that to get you here. Please don't jump, Sae."

"You're sick!" Sae exclaims, jabbing a finger at him. "Lying about my brother just to see me again? Like some- some deranged stalker?! I never should have come here! I knew this was a mistake!"

"Fine. Fine, then go." Shidou waves his hands, barking a sharp laugh. "What the hell, why not? I'll see you again tomorrow anyway."

"You won't ever see me again," Sae swears, and he turns on his heel and stalks off.

Shidou's heart hurts worse than it ever had before.

Trending today:

Sae Itoshi

Suicide

-*-

November 11th. 7:23 AM.

"Is this a cruel joke?" Shidou asks. "A divine punishment?"

No response, not from God or the universe.

Ryusei Shidou: are you up

Demon Jr: sure why not

Ryusei Shidou: I'm going to tell you something INSANE but you have to swear you'll believe me okay

Demon Jr: okay???

Ryusei Shidou: dude I'm in a timeloop rn

Ryusei Shidou: and today Sae Itoshi is going to kill himself

Demon Jr: WHOA! that's a lot lol

Ryusei Shidou: why the hell are you laughing out loud I'm not joking man

Demon Jr: okay y'know what? sure. you're in a timeloop. why not?

Ryusei Shidou: do you actually believe me?

Demon Jr: idk lol but this is more interesting than whatever else is going on in my life

Demon Jr: so Sae kills himself? yikes. how's it happen?

Ryusei Shidou: he jumps off his balcony

Demon Jr: classy

Ryusei Shidou: have some respect! that's your father in another universe

Demon Jr: the universe where you can pull? 💀💀💀

Ryusei Shidou: the universe where Sae isn't a raging narcissistic cunt

Ryusei Shidou: still, he's dead so it feels weird disrespecting him

Demon Jr: well he's not dead yet, is he? what're you gonna do?

Ryusei Shidou: I don't know

Ryusei Shidou: I've already tried reaching out and talking to him but I just can't get him to hear me out

Demon Jr: hmmm that's tricky

Demon Jr: if I were you I'd lowkey just show up at his house and be like LET ME INNN!

Ryusei Shidou: BREAKING AND ENTERING?

Demon Jr: well a guy's life is in your hands, right? and if you're rlly in a loop you can just wake up tomorrow consequence free

Ryusei Shidou: somehow I think that would make him even more pissed at me

Demon Jr: timeloops are all about testing different options until you hit the right combination

Demon Jr: you have to break a few snails to hit the hammer or whatever they say

Ryusei Shidou: ?????

Ryusei Shidou: whatever that means

Ryusei Shidou: okay. thanks charles

Demon Jr: np ^-^ text me tomorrow how it went :P

So Shidou makes his way to Sae's apartment.

Of course he knows where it is. It's the same property he'd visited countless times in the past. That had been when he'd still been welcome here. Stepping foot through the threshold feels wrong now. Entering the elevator feels wrong now. Letting it carry him up all those floors and imagining Sae taking the plummet down stirs a sick feeling in his gut.

He hopes he's remembering the right suite number, because his knock is loud and erratic. He doesn't speak yet out of fear Sae will hear him and shrink away further. After some time of persistent knocking, the door finally opens.

There he is, Sae Itoshi. He's wearing a dark turtleneck and a pair of grey sweatpants. His hair is messy, like he's either just woken up or hasn't bothered to do anything with it. And of course, those eyes, missing every spark of life.

Then, "Ryusei?" he says in disbelief.

"Wait, don't close the door." Shidou sticks his foot in between, just in case. "I need to talk to you."

"What do we possibly have to talk about?" Sae sounds more resigned in this loop. Probably because he doesn't think his brother is bleeding out in a hospital. *Asshole move on my part.*

Shit, what does Shidou even say now? "Can I come in?" he ventures.

He's so sure Sae is going to slam the door on his foot, but instead, his shoulders slump and he takes a step back. "Sure."

Entering Sae's apartment, Shidou takes in all the familiar sights. Except... everything is packed up in boxes now, stacked along the walls. The only furniture left is a single barstool by the kitchen counter.

"What's going on?" Shidou asks.

"...I'm moving," Sae returns shortly.

"Where?"

"Does it matter?"

"Kind of, yeah."

"It doesn't."

Shidou's eyes drift over to the balcony door. It's closed right now, but he can see the ledge through the glass panes. It makes his stomach flip.

"What are you doing here, Ryusei?" Sae asks, dragging a hand through his hair and leaning against the counter. "I don't have time for this."

Now Shidou is at another crossroads. Does he tell Sae straight up about his suicide? Play it cool? *Timeloops are all about testing different options until you find the right combination.* Right, he doesn't have to panic. He has another try after this- right?

"I just felt like you needed someone here today," Shidou finally says earnestly. "I dunno. Call it a gut feeling."

"...you shouldn't be here." Sae turns his face away, and Shidou swears he can see his bottom lip trembling. "If I- *need* someone, it's definitely not you."

It stings like a blow he'd been struck by. "Words hurt, Sae-chan."

"Don't call me that."

Three years ago, they'd been in this apartment, tangled in each other's embrace. Three years ago, Sae had promised to wait for him after Blue Lock. Three years ago, Shidou had felt more alive than he'd ever felt.

"This apartment feels like a death trap," Shidou says. "Wanna get out?"

“What?”

"I dunno, get something to eat? Please, Sae, I just... I can't leave you here alone."

"Whatever crazy scheme you're cooking up, it's not going to work," Sae says. "But fine, I'll humor you if it means you get out of my hair faster."

A small victory, but a victory all the same. Sae throws on his jacket and shoes and follows Shidou out of the apartment, locking it behind them. Shidou finally feels like he can breathe again with the balcony out of sight.

They end up at a small cafe not too far. Sae orders a black coffee. Shidou gets a meal. "Are you not hungry?" Shidou asks.

"No. Haven't been in a while," Sae says absently, staring out the window.

"Have a bite of mine," Shidou offers. "C'mon, open up~"

Sae swats his hand away with a scowl. "Don't push things," he snaps. "It won't end well for you."

"Believe me, I know," Shidou says sourly. "I don't want to be here anymore than you want me here."

"Then why *are* you here?"

"'cause the universe decided you needed someone, and I guess that someone is me."

Sae snorts. "You're always talking nonsense."

What's nonsense is the fact you're going to kill yourself today. "Don't you miss my nonsense?" Shidou asks with a wink.

Any trace of humor falls from Sae's face. "I'm not in the mood," he says, and Shidou feels like he somehow took a step back. How is he supposed to make progress with this guy? It felt like there was a wall between them; everything they used to share was gone.

Then he thinks, *well, if I was suicidal, the last thing I'd want to see is my ex* , and he can't help but despair. Was there really nothing he could do to change Sae's fate?

No. Ryusei Shidou isn't a quitter. He'll find a way. Hell, he has countless attempts to try, right? In theory, anyway. Maybe one day he'll wake up and Sae will really be dead.

"Let's have a ditch day," Shidou says. "We'll do whatever the hell we want and not worry about anyone else in our life."

Sae's eyebrows raise. "What if all I want to do is go back to my apartment and have you leave me alone?"

"Sure, you could do that. But wouldn't this be more fun?" Shidou leans across the table. "C'mon, Sae. Humor me just this one day, and then I'll be out of your life again forever."

"...fine," Sae says. "I'll play along. So what's your plan?"

"Well, what do you wanna do?"

"I don't care. You decide."

"Fine, I'll pick first." Shidou thinks, tapping his chin. "I know! Let's go roller blading!"

"Are you serious?"

Shidou is, in fact, serious. Him and Sae turn up at the roller rink, Shidou thrilled and Sae less than. Shidou pays for their skates, and the two sit side by side on the bench, lacing them up.

"Have you ever been skating before?" Shidou asks.

"Only ice skating."

"I love roller skating," Shidou continues. "I'm sure you'll love it too! I'll show you how to do it."

"It can't be that different from ice," Sae replies sourly.

It is, in fact, that different. Sae clutches the wall as Shidou goes gliding past him, skating in time to the music blasting overhead. Sae looks infuriated, taking a step forward but immediately grabbing ahold of the wall again. Shidou decides to extend a bit of pity.

He skates back to his side, coming to a halt. "We can get you a walker," he jokes, "Like kids use."

"This was stupid," Sae says, to his surprise. "I should have never come here."

"Wha- hey, Sae-chan!" Shidou exclaims. "Come on, is it really that bad?"

"Why did I come here with you?" Sae asks.

"I don't know. Why did you?"

"I don't know!" Sae's knuckles turn white from his grip on the wall. "Maybe I thought- I thought if I tried this, it would change things."

"Change what?"

"Everything. I don't know."

"Well, you only just got here. Change doesn't happen in a second," Shidou points out. "So why not just- forget about *everything* , and come skate with me?"

He offers out a hand, and Sae eyes it warily.

"Oh come on, I don't bite."

"You *are* a demon," Sae says. "Who knows what you'll do?"

"Wanna find out?" Shidou asks with a sly grin.

Sae takes his hand. It's cold to the touch, and Shidou easily envelopes it in his own. Sae's fingers are slender, his hands small. Or maybe it's just that everything about him seems so fragile right now.

"Bend your knees. Don't be so stiff," Shidou says. "It is a lot like ice skating. Don't let the wheels fool you."

Sae pushes off the wall, and Shidou follows, their hands intertwined. Shidou slowly, carefully leads him in a lap around the rink. Sae is unsteady, but as they go on, he seems to find his confidence and footing.

"I'm gonna let go now," Shidou says.

"Don't let me fall," Sae pleads, and Shidou feels like he's asking for more than just on the rink.

"I'm right here, Sae-chan. I always have been."

Sae releases his hand and starts off on his own. Shidou watches, almost mesmerized, as the multicolored lights flashing above illuminate Sae's silhouette. He's graceful in his movements, radiating elegance in his every stride. He completes the lap before Shidou can even react, caught in the trance that was Sae Itoshi.

"You were right," Sae says. "This is fun."

Sae Itoshi is grace and dignity. He's a perfectly carved sculpture, a practiced dance. He knows how to give and he knows how to take. Shidou swallows the lump in his throat. He can't do this. There's a life in his hands, but he can't do this.

"I- I need a minute. Sorry." Shidou is already turning away, quickly skating back toward the end of the rink. He can feel Sae's gaze burning on his back, but he doesn't care. Exiting the rink, he makes his way over to the bench, plopping down onto it and putting his head in his hands. All at once, he's so overwhelmed. Being with Sae again is too much.

"Ryusei." Speak of the devil, there he is, standing over him. "What happened? Are you okay?"

Shidou gives a bitter laugh. "I'm supposed to be the one comforting you."

"Comforting *me* ?" Sae asks incredulously. "Over what?"

"God, I just- I can't do this, Sae. Not yet. I'm sorry."

"What the hell are you sorry for?!" the former genius spits. "I didn't ask you to do any of this! *You're* the one trying to force your way back into my life, and now *you're* having a freak out over it?"

"I'm not- you kill yourself, Sae!" Shidou exclaims. "You kill yourself today, and I'm supposed to fix it! All of a sudden I have to care about you again, and I'm just not fucking ready!"

Sae's eyes widen, as if he's taken aback. "What are you talking about?" he asks defensively. "I-"

"I'm just not ready," Shidou says lamely. "I know it makes me selfish, but I can't do it today. I'm sorry, Sae. I'll see you in the next loop."

He yanks off his skates even as Sae stares at him bug-eyed, gets to his feet and starts off.

"Ryusei!" Sae shouts after him. "Don't- well, fuck you too! Are you doing this just to torment me?!"

Shidou keeps walking.

Trending today:

Sae Itoshi

Suicide

-*-

November 11th. 7:23 AM.

Ryusei Shidou: your brother's going to kill himself today

Rinrin: what the fuck?

There. Someone else can take care of it. It doesn't have to be Shidou this time. He lays back down, cheek against his pillow, and closes his eyes. It's out of his hands now.

When he wakes up again, his phone is buzzing. Three missed calls from Aiku. A dozen texts from everyone on the team. A current call from Rin.

Shidou picks up. "Hello?"

"Where the hell are you?" Rin demands. *"You missed practice. Everyone is starting to think you're the one killing yourself."*

"So you stopped him?" Shidou asks.

"No. I tried calling and texting but he wouldn't answer, then I had to get to practice. How the hell do you know, anyway? That's not something Sae would do."

"I just- I just know, okay?" Panic rises in Shidou's chest. "Fuck, what time is it?"

"About 3pm. Why?"

"Rin, you have to go stop him," Shidou says urgently. "He's going to jump. Just- just believe me, *please* ."

"...fine. I'll check on him. You better not be wasting my time."

The line disconnects. Shidou falls back into bed, staring up at the ceiling. Still, no matter how much he tries to settle his nerves, a feeling of dread remains. He should do something. He should go with Rin, try to help.

No, wasn't the entire point of telling Rin that he wouldn't have to do anything? Surely Rin could do better than he could. After all, they were brothers. Shidou had no place in Sae's life. Maybe the reason Shidou kept failing was because he kept trying to do it himself. Sending Rin had been the right idea.

4:30 passes. Then 5:30. Shidou checks the trending tab. No mention of Sae. Relief stirs in his chest. He'd done it. He'd finally done it.

Ryusei Shidou: how'd it go?

Rinrin: terrible.

Rinrin: got in a fight. I shouldn't have gone.

Ryusei Shidou: seriously?! can you not pick a fight for two seconds??

Rinrin: he started it. he seems fine to me.

Rinrin: what the hell did you think I was supposed to do? we're on shit terms. all you did was waste our time.

All you did was waste our time.

Today, the media says Sae Itoshi killed himself at around 6:00. The news doesn't spread until 7:00. Shidou's phone blows up with texts from Rin, but he can't bring himself to answer.

So it has to be me, he thinks dully. He pictures Sae at the roller rink, the barest hint of a smile on his face. *I'm the only one who can do it.*

Trending today:

Sae Itoshi

Suicide

-*-

November 11th. 7:23 AM.

"Let's have a ditch day."

They're back at the roller rink. Sae is skating back toward him.

"You were right. This is fun."

How does he go from this to a splatter of blood and guts on the ground? Shidou wonders if at some point in these loops, he'll see the body. He doesn't think he can cope with that.

"You're a natural," Shidou says with a smile he doesn't feel. "Let's go again."

They skate lap after lap until they're sick of it, and then Shidou is buying them cheap food and sodas from the bar. Sae sits at the table, elbows propped on top with his chin resting in his hands. They're sandwiched between a table with two crying children with a single mom and a birthday party currently divvying up slices of cake.

Shidou sets the food down, taking a seat across from him. "So where to next?" he asks. "It's your pick."

Sae fiddles with his straw, twirling it around in the soda cup. "I dunno," he says.

"Come on. Think of anywhere in the world you could go right now. What would you want to be doing?"

Before Sae can answer, Shidou phone buzzes. He shoots Sae an apologetic glance and checks it. It's Aiku. *Oh, shit.*

Shidou reluctantly answers. "Heyyy, captain."

"Where are you?" Aiku asks instead of a greeting. *"Practice is starting and Rin's getting pissed."*

"I'm..." Shidou struggles to think of an excuse. "I'm not gonna make it today. Sorry."

"You're not going to make it? Why not?"

"Something really important came up. Like, really important. Sorry, cap."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's okay. Listen, don't worry about it. Everything will be back to normal tomorrow. Tell the guys I'm sorry."

"Coach is going to be mad."

"Eh, he can fuck off."

"Can you at least tell me what's so important that you have to miss practice for it?"

"Top secret. Bye bye, Aiku!"

"Don't you dare hang-"

Shidou hangs up.

"Aiku?" Sae asks. "Did you have something going on today?"

"Yeah, I was supposed to be at practice," Shidou admits.

Sae's eyes widen. "Why aren't you there? Are you seriously skipping for *me* ?"

"It's for both of us, trust me," Shidou sighs. "I just want to make it to tomorrow."

Sae's brows furrow. "Seriously, what is up with you? You're acting weirder than usual."

"Like you'd have any frame of reference," Shidou can't help but shoot back.

The former genius falls quiet. Then, "Is that what you want from all this? An apology?"

"No, but one wouldn't hurt either." Shidou can't help the note of bitterness that escapes into his voice.

"You were one of the best things to ever happen to me," Sae says, so quiet amidst the clamor, Shidou almost misses it.

"So what happened?"

"I do what I always do," Sae returns, averting his gaze. "Break it."

"...I think I know what we're doing next," Shidou decides.

Sae drives them to the grocery store. They spent minutes browsing the isles, examining bottles and putting them back down. "I'm paying," Sae offers. "Get whatever you want." Shidou finds the most expensive thing he can and puts it in the cart.

The two roll up to the checkout with enough alcohol for a small army, or maybe a house party. Then they're back at Sae's apartment, scouring through boxes for two glasses.

"This is so stupid," Sae says, watching Shidou pour out a bottle.

"What, the day drinking, or the day drinking with me?"

"All of it," Sae snorts.

"Well, I've never met a problem alcohol couldn't fix," Shidou quips. "And it seems to me we have a very big problem."

"You keep saying things like that," Sae says absently. "What prompted all this?"

"What if I told you I had a dream?" Shidou holds out the glass toward Sae. "A really, really bad dream."

"Sure." Sae takes the glass, and their fingers brush. "What about?"

"In this dream, you're standing on your balcony." Shidou leans against the counter, watching him carefully. "And you're thinking something."

"What am I thinking?"

"You're thinking... I don't know, actually. I don't know why you're here, or what's going on in your head. But you swing your legs over the railing, and you're staring down at the ground."

"And then what happens?" Sae asks quietly.

"Then you let go, and you fall. And in this dream, I try over and over again, but I can never catch you."

"You try to catch me?"

"I try," Shidou says. "This is the furthest I've ever gotten."

"So this is a dream too?" Sae gives a quiet laugh.

"It'll become a dream when it's over," Shidou returns. "Unless this time, I catch you."

"And why do you try so hard to catch me?" Sae breathes. "In these dreams."

"Because I'm the only one who can."

"I know what I'm thinking," Sae murmurs. "When I'm standing on the balcony. I'm thinking... everything is too much, and I have nothing ahead of me." He takes a long sip of his drink, exhaling. "In my dreams, no one ever comes to catch me."

"It doesn't have to stay like that," Shidou returns. "I'm here now, Sae."

"Okay," Sae says. "No more talking. Let's just forget about everything, just for today."

Shidou is more than happy to drink to that.

They down glass after glass, bottle after bottle. Sae is a lightweight, Shidou takes more time. He's dancing to some invisible song that only the two of them can hear. Shidou is laughing, Sae is laughing, and everything in the universe is a joke. Sae takes his hand and spins him around. "Cinderella," he says sluggishly. "Let me take you to the ball."

"Ball?" Shidou asks. "Are you finally gonna pass to me again?"

Sae giggles. "I don't play anymore."

"You should." Shidou grasps his hands earnestly. "Why'd you stop?"

"Dunno. Shhh." Sae sets a finger over his lips. "No more soccer. Dance with me."

They tango around Sae's apartment, bumping into and tripping over boxes. They're both laughing, and the dumb smile on Sae's face is priceless. It's as if the alcohol had worn away all his troubles. Just for one day, just for a few hours.

Then they're both collapsed on Sae's bed, staring up at the ceiling. "One, two, three," Shidou mumbles.

"What're you doing?"

"Counting stars."

"There are no stars."

"Oh, yeah. I guess you're right."

"You're a star," Sae says seriously.

"What does that make you?" Shidou wonders.

"A black hole," Sae returns. "I'm sorry I sucked you in, Ryusei."

"That's okay. You wanna know a secret?" Shidou asks with a giggle.

"Yeah, sure."

Shidou rolls onto his side, staring Sae in the eyes. "I'm in a timeloop," he whispers, "Tomorrow, we're going to do something completely different."

"Really?" Sae gasps, eyes wide. "Those are real?"

"Yeah," Shidou returns. "What do you want to do tomorrow?"

"Hmm..." Sae furrows his brows, clearly thinking hard. "Take me mini golfing," he settles on.

"Really? Mini golfing?"

"What?" Sae pouts. "I haven't gone in forever. Used to go with Rin and my parents when we were kids."

"Okay, Sae-chan," Shidou promises. "I'll take you mini golfing."

"When does the loop end?" Sae asks curiously. "What's the end goal?"

"I have to catch you."

Sae's gaze darkens, and he looks away. "That might be harder than you think," he murmurs.

"I've got a long time to figure it out."

"I'm tired," Sae says.

"Of?"

"Everything."

"Then let's go to sleep," Shidou suggests. "Everything will be okay when we wake up in the morning."

"Because your timeloop will be over," Sae returns.

"Yeah."

"I'm in a timeloop too," Sae admits. "Or at least, it feels like I am. Every day is the same thing, over and over again. Only mine won't end when you catch me. Mine will keep going on forever, until the day I die."

"Mm," Shidou hums, and his brain is too foggy to untangle the meaning behind whatever Sae had just said. "I don't think that's how timeloops work. You can't leave one if you're dead."

Sae doesn't answer.

"Just stay with me tonight, Sae-chan," Shidou mumbles, eyelids drooping. "And tomorrow, wherever I end up, I'll take you mini golfing."

"Okay," Sae exhales. He curls up against Shidou's side, a beacon of warmth. Shidou instinctively wraps an arm around his frame, holding him close. It's almost like nothing had ever come between them. Like it's three years ago, and they're young and dumb again.

Shidou drifts off to the familiarity.

He doesn't know what time he wakes up at, but the haze of alcohol is starting to wear off. Blearily, he reaches for Sae, only to find he's not there.

"Sae?" he mumbles, sitting up. His head pounds in time with his heart.

There's a note on the bedside table.

I need to break my loop. I'm sorry you couldn't catch me this time.

Panicked, Shidou stumbles out of the bedroom. Bottles of alcohol are strewn across the floor. The balcony door is open. Bile rising in his throat, he trips his way outside, cold air stinging his face. Leaning over the railing, Shidou stares down and down.

Sae is there. His body, a speck on the floor, lying still in a pool of blood.

Shidou sinks down against the railing, clutching his head in his hands. The sobs that tear from his chest are unlike any he's cried before, an unstoppable flood of tears pouring down his cheeks. Sirens wail in the distance, but all Shidou can do is cry harder, curling up against the rail and retching up all the alcohol left in his system.

Trending today:

Sae Itoshi

Suicide

Ryusei Shidou

i wont fall in love with falling

Chapter Notes

aaa thank you so much for all the love on this fic already !!! <3

November 11th. 7:23 AM.

Shidou is officially having the worst week of his life.

He finally thought he'd done it. He'd given Sae a great day, even stayed over with him. But apparently alcohol and roller skating weren't enough to get rid of the genius' suicidal tendencies, so Shidou was forced to look at the root of the problem.

Which was-

Which was...?

Shidou doesn't know. He doesn't know why Sae killed himself. Had never thought to ask.

"I'm thinking everything is too much, and I have nothing ahead of me."

Shidou had been an idiot to think he could just gloss over the real problem by giving Sae a distraction. Because the real problem was whatever was festering deep inside Sae that would drive him to suicide.

A temporary fix wouldn't do. He'd been close, he was sure of it. He just needed a different plan.

First, though, he had a promise to keep.

The roller rink had been fun, so he keeps it again this loop. Sitting at the table afterward, Shidou ignores Aiku's call this time.

"Let's go mini golfing," he says.

Sae snorts. "Mini golfing? Really?"

"That's what I said," Shidou mutters under his breath. "Yeah. You haven't been in a while, right?"

Sae regards him cautiously. "...I used to go with Rin and my parents when we were kids."

I know. "So it'll be fun to go again, right?"

"Sure," Sae reluctantly gives in. "Let's go mini golfing."

The course they find themself at is themed around a pirate ship. Shidou takes an eyepatch from the gift shop and wraps it around his eye. "How do I look?"

"Like an idiot," Sae replies, finishing paying at the counter. He pointedly holds out a club toward Shidou, who puts the eyepatch down and accepts it.

"Ooh, what color ball do you want?" Shidou asks excitedly. "I want pink!"

"Pink is my color," Sae frowns.

"No way, it's always mine!" Wait, maybe he should let the suicidal person have the color he wants. "But just this once I'll let you have it. I know, I'll be turquoise! Like your eyes."

Sae's face flushes, and he picks up his ball and turns away. "Be whatever you want," he says shortly.

The two stand on the edge of the first course, a simple one to start with. The hole is within sight at the end. "You wanna go first?" Shidou asks.

"You can go," Sae returns. "I'm rusty."

Shidou pulls back his club and closes one eye, sticking out his tongue. Then he swings, sending the ball flying right over the hole and right up against the net on the side blocking off a small pool of water.

"Wow. You suck," Sae says. "Have you ever even done this before?"

"No," Shidou admits. "I'm a soccer player, not a golfer!"

"Go get your ball," Sae says humorously. "I'll show you."

Shidou jogs over to retrieve his ball and returns to watch Sae place his down.

"Just... be gentle." Sae scrutinizes the ball, then raises his club. With the carefulest of touches, he gives it a tap, and the ball goes rolling down the course right into the hole.

Shidou immediately bursts into applause. "Hole in one! Who knew you were a professional golfer?"

"It's not that hard," Sae says. "It's all about control."

"A lot like midfielding," Shidou tries. Sae doesn't answer. "Why'd you quit soccer, anyway?"

"I just didn't want to play anymore," Sae says shortly, starting down the course to pick up his ball.

Shidou sets his down, eyeing the path he wants. "Just 'cause? Or did something happen?" He swings, and the ball rolls down the grassy lane, a few inches short of the hole. Damn, too

gentle.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I think it's important," Shidou says. He taps the ball again, and this time it goes into the hole. "Everyone was shocked when it happened, especially Rin. No one saw it coming."

"I was just... tired, okay?" Sae stares off at the next course, wind lightly tousling his hair. "I couldn't do it anymore. It didn't feel like there was a point."

"The point is to become the best in the world."

"But what's the point of *that* ?" Sae asks sourly. "I spent years of my life chasing after being the best, and I lost everything because of it. I just- I just needed to step back from it all."

Shidou frowns. That didn't sound like the Sae he knew.

"Greed, ambition... I'm just sick of it all." Sae glances over his shoulder. "Come on, let's start the second hole."

They make their way through the course, slowly but steadily. Shidou progresses as they go, his swings getting better, but Sae keeps a large lead on him.

"Did you always kick Rin's ass in this too?" he asks, wiping his forehead.

Sae gives a small chuckle. "Rin was actually better than me, if you can believe it. He'd win every round."

Shidou tries to picture a little Rin and a little Sae running around a minigolf course, swinging clubs and counting strokes. It's an amusing thought.

"You're not terrible," Sae adds.

"Oh, please. You're cooking me alive."

Sae scoffs. "Just a little."

One time, Shidou miscalculates and swings too hard. The ball goes flying over the net and into the moat around the pirate ship they're currently playing on. Shidou's jaw drops, but to his surprise, Sae *laughs* . And oh, what a wonderful sound. It stirs something in Shidou's chest, and when he turns to look at Sae, he finds him smiling.

"What's so funny?" Shidou complains. "Now I have to get a new ball."

"Nothing. I just didn't even think it was possible to get it over the net."

"I'll throw *you* over the net!" Shidou approaches menacingly, and Sae holds out his club in self-defense.

"I'll hit you if you come close to me!" he threatens, and Shidou snorts.

"Let's just share your ball," Shidou suggests. "Then we won't have to pay for another one."

"You're such a cheapskate," Sae says with an eye roll. "Fine, we can share mine. But if you lose this one too, you're paying."

"Yay! I get to be pink after all," Shidou cheers.

Sae wins in the end. The score isn't even close. After they return their clubs (and only one ball), Shidou approaches Sae, hands in his pockets.

"Did you have fun?" he questions.

"...yeah," Sae replies. "I did. It almost makes me feel like a kid again."

Shidou glances over at him. "Do you miss it? Childhood?"

"I don't know," Sae admits. "Things did seem simpler back then, didn't they?"

"Maybe we can go mini golfing again sometime," Shidou suggests. "We can bring Rin."

Sae's gaze darkens, and he looks away. "That's not necessary," he breathes.

"When was the last time you spoke to him?"

"Not in a while."

"Why not?"

"It's none of your concern."

Again, Shidou feels like he's hit a wall. How can he help if Sae won't let him in? They had been having fun mini-golfing. Sae had been laughing. Things were going good. So how was he supposed to keep this up? It felt like such an impossible task.

"So where to next?" Sae asks.

"You wanna keep going? Really?"

"What, am I not supposed to?" A scowl forms on Sae's face. "I'm more than happy to just go home."

"No, no, let's go somewhere else!" Shidou exclaims. "Come on, you haven't picked a spot at all yet. Well, I guess mini golfing was you, but..."

"Mini golfing was you," Sae says quizzically.

"Forget it. It's your pick, Sae-chan!"

Sae's brows furrow as he thinks. Finally, he looks back up at Shidou and says, "Can we do something... crazy and irreversible?"

"Like what?" Shidou jokes. "Get matching tattoos?"

"Sure," Sae says, to his eternal surprise. "Let's do that."

And so after a bit of research to find a tattoo shop able to take walk-ins, Shidou finds himself standing by Sae, seated on the tattoo chair. The former genius seems almost nervous, tapping his foot against the floor as the tattoo artist prepares her tools.

They're not getting anything crazy- Sae is getting a velociraptor and Shidou a seagull, each for the other's favorite animal. Out of all the things in the world Shidou thought he'd end up doing, getting matching tattoos with his ex certainly wasn't on the list. It was an idea he never thought Sae of all people would ever agree to, but here they were.

"It won't hurt that bad," Shidou reassures Sae. "I think." He glances over at the tattoo artist for confirmation, but she just shrugs.

"I'm not scared," Sae spits, even though he obviously is.

"I'll hold your hand," Shidou quips.

"Hold out your arm and do your best not to move," the artist instructs. Sae complies, then she brings the needle down.

Sae's other hand, shockingly, reaches for Shidou. He doesn't think twice before accepting the gesture, taking Sae's hand in his own and squeezing. He offers no judgement, just watches silently as the artist continues her skillful work.

"Why a velociraptor?" Sae asks.

"The way they eat people is cute," Shidou replies with a chuckle. "Why a seagull?"

"I don't know," he admits. "I think it'd be nice to just... fly away from it all."

"So how long have you too been together?" the artist asks, innocently enough.

"We're not-" Shidou starts.

"No, we're not-" Sae protests. "We're not together."

"We're just..." Shidou casts his eyes onto Sae. What *were* they, anyways? Shidou's entire day now revolved around trying to save Sae's life. In the process, he'd met many different versions of Sae, none who would remember him.

"Friends," Sae supplies, almost cautiously, like he's asking for permission.

"Friends," Shidou nods with a smile.

"Ah, I'm sorry for assuming," the artist immediately apologizes.

"No worries," Shidou says chipperly.

The tattoo only takes about an hour, then it's Shidou's turn in the chair. Sae let's go of his hand to admire his new tattoo.

"You like it?" Shidou asks.

"Yeah," Sae breathes. "I never thought I'd ever get a tattoo. They're too... permanent."

"What changed your mind now?"

"I just don't think it matters anymore," Sae says, sort of wistfully. "At the end of the day, will anything?"

So he's still planning on jumping. "Will you hold *my* hand, Sae-chan?" Shidou questions. "I'm really scared of pain."

"I doubt that very much," Sae snorts, but humors him, taking the hand that's not being tattooed. The artist starts her work, and Shidou watches her careful lines slowly make the art come to life.

"Y'know, I love art," Shidou comments. "It's like an explosion of its own."

"Really?" Sae frowns. "I didn't know that about you."

"I'm full of surprises, Sae-chan," Shidou winks. "Here, I'll give you your next tattoo."

"With what, a stick and poke off Amazon?" Sae scowls. "No thanks."

"Maybe in the next loop, I'll take you to a museum," Shidou suggests. "You can learn something new about me."

"What?"

"Don't worry about it."

Shidou's tattoo takes a bit less than Sae's, and at the end of it, the two hold their arms next to each other to admire the work. "They look good together," Sae remarks.

"Yeah," Shidou affirms. "They sure do."

As they pay and leave a generous tip, Sae eyes the piercing portion of the tattoo shop. Shidou follows his gaze.

"Hey, I'll get something pierced if you do," he suggests.

Sae glances at him in surprise. "Really? Like what?"

"Dunno. Always thought I'd look good with a lip piercing."

"Fine," Sae says. "You pick what I should get."

"That's a lot of power to hold, Sae-chan," Shidou teases. "Hmm... is a tongue piercing too crazy?"

"Nothing is too crazy," Sae returns. "I'll do it."

And Shidou had been right- he does look good with a lip piercing. He admires the snakebites in the piercer's mirror, while Sae checks out his new tongue piercing beside him.

"It feels weird," Sae comments. "Does it look good?"

Shidou turns to study him, taking in the new piercing. And holy shit, that's really fucking hot. Unwillingly, a daydream of what it would feel like to make out with him and feel that piercing in his mouth flashes through his head, and he shakes himself to get rid of it.

"Yeah," he says lamely. "You look smoking hot, Sae-chan."

Sae's lip curls, but he doesn't give a usual griping remark. Instead, he just says, "Yours looks good too. It fits you."

Back outside, Shidou pulls out his phone and checks the time. It's about 3:00 PM- only an hour to go before Sae kills himself. "So what's next on the agenda?" he asks.

"You're really not tired yet?" Sae questions. "I think I need a break."

"Okay," Shidou says quickly. "Let's find a nice spot and just relax. How's that sound?" If Sae walks away from him now, it's over. He hasn't yet found a way to stop him from killing himself, hasn't gathered all the information he needs yet.

"...sure, Ryusei," Sae returns. "We can do that."

They end up sitting by the water, cool breeze brushing their cheeks. Sae sits with his legs pulled up against his chest, while Shidou lounges back, staring up at the sky.

"Let's run away, Sae-chan," he says. "Take off somewhere and fly, like that seagull of yours. We can go to a different country. Change our names. Start a new life."

Sae snorts. "You wouldn't do that. Not for me."

"Would I?"

Sae turns his head away with a long exhale. "I should have waited for you," he croaks out. "I don't have an excuse. I was... scared shitless of what would happen if I tried. If I let myself be happy. I thought you'd be better off without me, just like everyone else is."

"That's not true," Shidou protests. "Meeting you was the best and worst thing to ever happen to me. Best 'cause it was you, and worst 'cause it ended."

"I break everything good around me," Sae says. "It just happens, whether I mean to or not. I'm tired of hurting people. I'm tired of everything, Ryusei. I just want it to stop."

"Hey." Shidou reaches out, taking Sae's hand in his. "Sae, don't say that. Look at me."

"Even now, you're here trying to give me some kind of 'best day ever'," Sae snorts, wiping a tear from his eye. "What did I do to deserve this? All I ever did was hurt you. Why are you here, Ryusei?"

"The truth is I'm being selfish," Shidou admits. "I wanted to get you through this day so my life could continue. Then I met a bunch of different versions of you, and each of them taught me something. They taught me that you're worth saving, Sae. Every version of you is worth saving, even the asshole ones or the ones that hate me."

Sae gives a dry chuckle. "And which 'version' of me is your favorite?"

"The one I'm here with now," Shidou says earnestly. "That version will always be my favorite."

Sae leans over and kisses him.

Shidou is shocked, but doesn't let surprise throw him off. He reaches up to cup Sae's face with his hands, pulling him closer to deepen the kiss. One of Sae's hands stray to his leg as he shifts over, his other hand reaching up to grip his hair. Sae's tongue slides into his mouth, and Shidou finally feels that piercing- and oh, is it heavenly. Wait, he probably shouldn't be making out with someone with a healing tongue piercing, or with his own healing lip piercings. Eh, fuck it. He's not going to blow this chance.

Sae pulls back abruptly, shame written across his face. "I'm sorry," he says, "I can't- I shouldn't have done that. I don't want to take advantage of you. It's not fair."

"Fuck," Shidou pants. "Are you seriously blue balling me right now, Sae-chan?"

"You don't understand," Sae turns away. "I'm kissing you now because I know there's going to be no consequences. I'm kissing you because I'm selfish."

"Sae, I don't fucking care," Shidou says. "If you wanna kiss me, then kiss me. We'll figure out the hard part later."

"No, you don't- you don't get it." Sae is already standing, pushing himself to his feet. "I have to go. I'm sorry, Ryusei."

"Sae-chan!" Shidou scrambles up, reaching out for him. "Don't go. Let me stay with you. I know you think I don't get it, but I do. Believe me, I do."

"I'm just going to hurt you again," Sae hisses. "Just... stay out of my life, Ryusei. It's for your own good."

"Screw my own good!" Shidou exclaims. "I'm selfish too, y'know! If I hook up with you in a loop, it makes me a dickhead. Or- actually, I'm not going to question the morals of timeloops."

"What are you going on about?!"

"Listen, just- please, Sae," Shidou says lamely. "We can make this work."

Sae regards him with an expression one could only describe as despair. "There's no universe where we make this work," he says dully. "I'm the common denominator in everything that goes wrong. Find someone who can make you happy, Ryusei. You deserve it."

With that, he starts off, and Shidou doesn't have the heart to follow. He knows it won't get him anywhere. He'd fumbled this loop, and all he could do was prepare for the next one.

He looks down at the seagull on his arm, wrapped in the second skin. Now, he's convicted. He's going to save Sae Itoshi, not because he has to, but because he wants to. Sae was someone worth saving. He was going to get this right, one way or another.

Trending today:

Sae Itoshi

Suicide

Velociraptor

-*-

November 11th. 7:23 AM.

Sae's apartment. Rollerblading. Mini golfing.

"So where to next?" Sae asks.

"I know the perfect place," Shidou says.

He takes Sae to an art museum. It's a quiet day, not too many people are here. They stroll through the galleries, admiring the paintings. Shidou reads the little excerpts next to each piece and points out interesting facts to Sae.

"I didn't realize you were into art," Sae remarks.

"Art is a piece of the human soul," Shidou says. "A lot of people think what makes humans humans is our brains. The fact that we can think, that we can build. But even animals build shit. No, the one thing humans have that separates us from others is art."

"That's... surprisingly deep."

"Hey, I'm pretty philosophical. I'm not all dick for brains 24/7."

Sae snorts. "It's... nice to see this side of you."

"What about you, Sae-chan?" Shidou questions. "What are you into besides soccer?"

"...I don't really have hobbies," Sae says. "Soccer was all I had."

"But you stopped playing."

"I told you, I just needed to step away."

"It's healthy to take breaks, but I don't think you should quit," Shidou returns. "You love soccer."

"Loved," Sae corrects. "I don't think I can love anything anymore."

"And why's that?"

"Because I'm broken," Sae says. "I'm a machine that doesn't work. There's something fundamentally wrong with me."

"I don't think so."

"Then you're only lying to yourself."

"You're a work of art, Sae-chan," Shidou says earnestly. "I'd choose you over any piece in this building."

Sae's face flushes, and he turns away, clearly flustered. "Pathetic demon," he mumbles, but Shidou hears anyway. It brings a grin to his face.

They spend an hour or two at the museum, and by the time they're finished, Shidou has another brilliant idea.

"Let's paint each other!" he exclaims. "All this art has me feeling inspired! We can go to the craft store and get canvases and shit."

"I don't know how to paint," Sae says awkwardly.

"You don't have to!" Shidou encourages. "C'mon, we can go back to my place. It'll be fun."

"...sure," Sae relents. "But don't expect anything incredible from me."

They drive to a nearby craft store to pick up supplies, then Shidou directs Sae to his apartment. Shidou distantly realizes there hasn't been a loop yet where Sae came home with him. When he unlocks the door, he holds it open for Sae, letting the other man in.

"It's nicer than your old place," Sae remarks, setting his bags down.

"Getting a professional contract will do that," Shidou shrugs. "Make yourself comfortable. You want anything to drink?"

"No, thank you." Sae settles himself at the kitchen table, pulling a canvas out of a bag. "So how does this work?"

"Just paint," Shidou says, settling down across from him with a canvas of his own. He squirts red, yellow, and blue onto his palette, along with white and black.

"Thanks," Sae snarks, "Very helpful."

"Seriously, just... draw what you see." Shidou shrugs. "Art is art, whether it looks good or not. It's about the feeling you put in behind it."

"The feeling," Sae echoes, musing to himself.

They don't talk much while they paint, just lapsing into comfortable silence. Shidou studies Sae's face, committing every detail to memory. Then he picks up his brush and starts to paint with quick, confident strokes.

Sae's lips, beautifully round. Sae's eyes, terribly dull. Sae's brows, how they furrow as he concentrates. Sae's slender face, his elegantly long eyelashes, his bangs brushed out of his forehead, the bags under his eyes. He captures Sae with the love and care of someone who's seen him in countless timelines only to end up here in this moment.

"How're you doing?" Shidou questions, setting down his brush.

"Fine," Sae replies, "I'm almost done."

Soon, he adds the finishing touches, and they both reveal their paintings to each other.

Sae's work is messy, his colors off and his strokes splotchy. Still, the subject matter can only be described as Ryusei Shidou. It's him, with his sharp eyeliner and pink tipped hair. The work brings a smile to Shidou's face. There was obviously attention put into the piece, even if it wasn't professional. Shidou wants to hang it up on his wall.

In contrast, Sae releases a small gasp at seeing his work. "Wow," he murmurs, "I didn't know you were that good."

"Aw, shucks, Sae-chan." Shidou rubs the back of his neck. "I'm halfway decent."

Sae takes the painting from him, studying it closely. He runs a finger down it, reverently and in awe. "I look... sad," he says finally.

He does look sad. But he also looks...

"Beautiful," Shidou supplies. "You're beautiful, Sae."

"Is this what you see when you look at me?"

"Yeah and no," Shidou returns. "I see someone who doesn't recognize their own worth. A star midfielder walking away from his dreams because he thinks he doesn't deserve it. I see a lonely man on an island surrounded by an ocean of his own fears, stranded and lost. You want to reach out for help, but you can't bring yourself to."

Sae gives a dry chuckle. "And what could you possibly know about me?"

"A lot more than you think," Shidou says.

"I should have waited for you."

"I know. Don't worry, Sae."

"I-"

"You don't break everything around you," Shidou says forcefully. "And you deserve to be happy, just like anyone else."

"I don't get it. Was all this just some attempt to get in my pants?" Sae groans, dragging a hand through his hair. "Why are you going through so much effort for me?"

"You always ask me that," Shidou says. "And I feel like I can never give you the right answer. Would it be simple enough to say it's because I love you, even after you broke my heart?"

"You don't love me," Sae scoffs. "You love the idea of me."

"No, Sae, I love you. Or at least, I want to have the chance to get to love you. Will you let me have that? Just a chance?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," Sae says quietly.

"I do, Sae. I really do, more than you can imagine." Shidou hesitates, then says, "You once told me that there's no universe where we make this work."

"Did I?" Sae frowns.

"And maybe you're right. Maybe in this one day, in every universe, I can't convince you to try." Shidou holds out his hands in a desperate plea. "But maybe, in just one moment, in just one reality, I can catch you when you fall. Wouldn't it be beautiful to try?"

"I don't know if I can," Sae confesses. "I don't think I'm strong enough."

"Then forget about it," Shidou says. "Forget about tomorrow, or the day after that. Just focus on today."

"I'm tired, Ryusei."

"I know."

"Can we pretend like it's the first time?" Sae asks, setting down the painting and reaching out a hand to run a finger down Shidou's arm. "I know it's selfish."

"Be as selfish as you want. I'm here for it."

"I never thought I'd see you again. Not like this."

"I didn't either."

"And yet here you are."

"I'll be here as long as you let me," Shidou says.

"Then come here," Sae urges, and Shidou doesn't have to be told twice.

He settles down onto Sae's lap, pulling him in for a kiss. Sae groans, his hands reaching up to tug on Shidou's hair. Fuck, kissing Sae Itoshi is like a dream come true. And this time, he doesn't have to worry about a healing piercing.

Shidou's hands roam down to Sae's waist, skimming under his shirt. Sae shudders under his touch, urging him closer. But Shidou can't get what he wants sitting in this chair, so he breaks the kiss to stand back up.

"C'mon," he says, holding out a hand. "Lemme get you out of those clothes, Sae-chan~"

Sae stands on shaky feet, allowing Shidou to lead him to the bedroom. Shidou immediately shucks off his shirt, and he doesn't miss the way Sae's eyes travel up his sculpted form. He's quick to help the former genius out of his turtleneck as well, leaving him exposed before him.

Shidou pushes him down onto the bed to press his lips to the side of Sae's neck, trailing more kisses down the soft skin. When he reaches his shoulder, he lightly bites down, grinning in victory as Sae gives a small moan.

"Ryusei," Sae mumbles. " *Fuck* ."

"Fuck indeed," Shidou says wryly.

"If you don't hurry up-"

"You've always been so impatient, Sae-chan," Shidou sings. "Just sit back, relax, and enjoy."

And Shidou does take his time, pulling down his pants with care. He slowly, carefully explores every inch of Sae's body, worshipping it with kisses and light touches. He knows exactly how to make Sae gasp and moan, all the right places that make him cry out his name. It's been forever, but he remembers it like it was yesterday.

Sex with Sae is sacred. It's heavenly. It makes Shidou feel like the luckiest man in the world that he's here on top of him, that he's the one who gets to adore him so. Sae reciprocates his affections, nails clawing down his bare back and frantic kisses pressed to his lips. Sae chants his name in fervor, like a dream. " *Ryusei* ."

Shidou knows they have to talk about it at some point- the reason Sae left in the first place. Maybe in the next loop. For now, he devours the former genius in a fit of passion, loving every inch of his skin and trying to convey just how special Sae was through his lips and touch.

Then it's over, and the two are laying side by side, breathing heavily. Shidou feels blissed out, caught in a lovestruck daze. Every inch of his skin is buzzing, and he's almost tempted to go another round.

"Shit," Sae mumbles.

"Yeah?"

"You're incredible."

Shidou beams, the compliment warming his heart. "I got a whole lot left to give, Sae-chan~"

Sae sits up, arms shaky, and crosses his legs. "Can I use your shower?"

"Huh? Yeah, sure, go for it." Shidou frowns. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Sae says. "I just want to wash off after... that."

"Lemme in with you, Sae-chan," Shidou sings. "I'll help you get squeaky clean!"

Sae grimaces, turning away. "No, that's okay. I'll... go alone."

Shidou watches Sae wander to the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Shit, he'd fumbled again. Apparently insanely good sex wasn't enough to talk someone out of suicide. Oh, come on! What had he been thinking, that he'd fuck Sae so good he'd find a will to live? There were clearly bigger issues.

Still... Shidou can't help but smile. Screw the moral ambiguity of fucking someone in a timeloop. He'd scored Sae Itoshi, which meant he could do it again.

Sae emerges from a shower after a bit, a towel wrapped around his form. "Can I borrow some clothes?"

"My closet's all yours to raid," Shidou says.

The two swap, and Shidou takes a shower of his own. When he exits, he finds Sae sitting on his bed, wearing one of his hoodies and a pair of sweatpants. Shidou's heart stirs at the sight.

"Hey," he says, plopping down beside him. "Wanna stay for dinner?"

"I should be heading home," Sae replies, staring off at the wall. "I've stolen enough of your time."

"You're not stealing my time, Sae. I'm here 'cause I want to be."

"You did it, Ryusei." Sae sounds tired, all of a sudden. "You got what you wanted."

"What?"

"We hooked up," he says lamely. "I had a good time today. I really did. You don't have to do this anymore."

"I- I didn't do this because I wanted to hook up with you!" Shidou protests.

"Then why, Ryusei?" Sae drags a hand through his hair. "I just don't get it. What in the world made you turn up at my apartment and drag me along all day out of nowhere?"

"...I had a dream," Shidou says. "And I think I'm finally starting to understand it."

"You had a *dream* ?" Sae snorts, full of bitterness.

"Look, it doesn't matter why I'm here. Just that I *am* here, Sae." Shidou reaches out a hand in earnest. "And I just have this awful feeling that if I let you walk away now, something terrible is going to happen."

"Because of your dream? Lukewarm reasoning."

"Because of you, Sae," Shidou says. "Please, just stay the night with me? I can't let you walk away from me. Not again."

Sae seems resigned, and his shoulders slump. "Okay," he breathes, "I'll stay."

Shidou almost jumps for joy and clicks his heels together. They end up ordering takeout for dinner and spend the rest of the evening just watching TV. Sae sits next to him on the couch, head resting on his shoulder. He seems tired.

They go to bed early, and Shidou resolves he's going to stay up all night just to make sure Sae doesn't slip out on him. They curl up in his bed together, Shidou wrapped around Sae like a sloth.

"G'night, Sae-chan," Shidou mumbles. "I'll see you in the morning." Finally, for once, he would.

"Goodnight," Sae murmurs back.

Sae slowly drifts off in his arms. Shidou lies wide awake, tediously counting down the minutes. He's actually going to make it. An entire day without Sae killing himself. It's so close-

12 AM strikes.

-*-

Shidou wakes up.

What the hell? Had he fallen asleep? But no, Sae is nowhere to be seen. In a panic, Shidou reaches for his phone, swiftly opening it up.

November 11th. 7:23 AM.

"What the *fuck* !"

maybe death is like falling asleep

Chapter Notes

wasteland by royal & the serpent is mandatory listening for this fic

thank you for all the love again!! i'm glad everyone is enjoying <3 have a lovely day!

For answers, Shidou turns to the one person he knows he can trust.

Ryusei Shidou: Charles get the fuck over here

Demon Jr: chill OUUUUUT I'm right here

Demon Jr: whats up

Ryusei Shidou: ok I've been through this before so I know you'll believe me but I'm in a timeloop

Demon Jr: a timeloop?! no fucking way

Ryusei Shidou: listen I'm rlly not in the mood to try to convince you so please just hear me out

Demon Jr: yeesh okay okay I'm listening. So you're in a timeloop, whats going on?

Ryusei Shidou: Sae Itoshi kills himself today, and I'm supposed to try to stop it

Ryusei Shidou: thing is, I actually did it. I got him through the day without killing himself, and everything just reset anyway!!!

Ryusei Shidou: so now I'm lowkey tweaking like wtf is going on?!? is saving sae not the goal?!? did I miss something?!?

Demon Jr: okok slow down

Demon Jr: that's a lot

Demon Jr: saving your ex from killing himself must be some kind of divine punishment 💀

Ryusei Shidou: not exes anymore!

Ryusei Shidou: well in the last loop we hooked up

Demon Jr: BRUH

Demon Jr: aren't you supposed to be trying to save his life 😭😭😭

Ryusei Shidou: I thought fucking him would help!!

Demon Jr: bruh x2

Demon Jr: okay if you think the goal is to save his life, then getting him through one day won't fix anything

Ryusei Shidou: wdym

Demon Jr: well let's say you get him through one day

Demon Jr: what's stopping him from killing himself the day after? or after that? or a week from now?

Demon Jr: the point is timeloops usually have like, a meaning to them

Demon Jr: if you want to save Sae's life, you can't just get him through one day. you have to make sure he doesn't end it all in the future

Ryusei Shidou: huh. that actually weirdly makes sense

Demon Jr: yeah I'm in queer media. really holding space for timeloops rn.

Ryusei Shidou: ???

Ryusei Shidou: literally whatever man

Ryusei Shidou: okay so I guess this is going to be a lot harder than I thought

Demon Jr: and the plot thickens!

Ryusei Shidou: thanks Charles

Demon Jr: tell me how it goes tomorrow :P

Ryusei Shidou: you said that last time too

Demon Jr: IM BECOMING PREDICTABLE NOOOOO

Shidou arrives at Sae's apartment, knocking on the door harshly. It takes a while for him to open up, as it usually does.

"Ryusei?" Sae asks in disbelief.

Instead of his usual convincing, Shidou barges right in, pushing past him. Sae releases a noise of confusion, then irritation, slamming the door shut behind them.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he demands.

"You're going to kill yourself," Shidou says.

Sae immediately falls still, mouth parted as if about to answer, then it closes in a firm line.

"Why?" Shidou asks. "Why do you do it, Sae?"

"I'm not going to kill myself," Sae snaps. "You're delusional."

"You quit soccer. Broke contact with everyone. Now your apartment is all packed up. A nice, tidy end with a bow on top."

"I don't know what you mean."

Frustrated, Shidou grabs Sae's wrist. Sae gives a short gasp but doesn't have time to react as Shidou drags him over to the balcony, shoving open the door and pushing Sae against the railing.

"Get off of me!" Sae cries.

"Why, Sae?" Shidou challenges. "Scared of the drop?"

"I-" Sae yanks himself away and out of Shidou's grasp. "You're insane. Get out before I call the cops."

"Fuck, this is going poorly. Maybe I just traumatize the shit out of you by jumping myself!" Feeling out of his mind, Shidou swings a leg over the balcony.

"Ryusei!" Sae shouts. "Stop! What are you doing?!"

"If I jump, will you not? Do I have to trade my life to save yours?" Shidou chuckles darkly, staring down at the ground far beneath them. His heart is hammering in his chest. He hasn't yet experienced death in a loop. Would it end with his death, or just reset again?

"Stop it, Ryusei!" Sae grabs ahold of his arm, a frantic look in his eyes. "Stop, I won't jump, okay?! Just- just get down!"

Shidou sucks in a long inhale, then sets his feet back down on the floor. Sae reels back, rubbing at his eyes.

"You're fucking insane," he hisses. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I don't know," Shidou admits. "I don't know why I did that."

"Fuck." Sae leans against the wall, exhaling sharply. "Seriously, what is your problem?"

"So you're the only one allowed to kill yourself?"

"I'm not-" Sae cuts himself off. "How the hell do you even know?"

"Maybe I'm psychic," Shidou flashes a devilish grin. "Maybe I read your diary."

"I don't have a diary."

"I have one. Hey, maybe you should try that. Journaling is therapeutic."

Sae drags a hand down his face. "...I wasn't planning on killing myself today," he finally says lamely. "I've been thinking about it for weeks. Months. But it's not like I decided yeah, it's going to be today."

"So... why today, then?" Shidou asks softly.

"I don't know," Sae breathes. "I guess I just figured... why not? Stalling it any longer won't change anything."

"Shit," Shidou mutters. "Sae-"

"Don't *Sae* me," Sae snaps. "What do you even care? It's not like we're on good terms. I thought I made it very clear that I don't want you in my life."

"Man, I should've warmed you up before doing this," Shidou says. "I keep forgetting you don't... remember."

"What?!"

"I've met you in a lot of different timelines, Sae-chan," Shidou sighs. "At first, I hated you for what you did to me. But spending time with you just reminded me of why I fell for you in the first place."

"You're talking nonsense," Sae says wearily.

"Maybe so."

The two stand silently on the balcony, Sae's head turned and gaze averted.

"Will you tell me why?" Shidou finally asks. "If I ask?"

"No."

"Should I leave?"

" *Yes* ."

"Okay," Shidou relents. At least this attempt hadn't been fruitless- he'd gotten a little something out of it. "Bye-bye, Sae-chan. I'll see you in the next loop."

"Seriously?" Sae asks, incredulous, and Shidou is taken aback. "I just admitted I'm going to kill myself, and you're walking away?"

"There's nothing I can do this loop," Shidou says, a helpless feeling stirring in his gut.

"Just- just fucking go, then," Sae snaps, his lower lip trembling. Shidou's heart breaks at the sight. "I didn't want your help anyway."

That's right- for Shidou, the day resets. He can afford to make mistakes, give up and try again. But for Sae, this was the last day of his life. His final few hours, and Shidou was walking away from him. How unloved must he feel in this moment?

But then again, what can Shidou do? He's blown his chance. Sae is clearly closed off to him in this loop, hostile.

"Sae," he says uselessly.

"Get *out* !" Sae seems close to hyperventilating, clutching at his head. "Just- just get out of my life!"

Shidou reaches out, and Sae swats him away with a cry. He presses one hand over his mouth as if he's ashamed, choking on a sob. "Fuck," he gasps out, sliding down against the balcony wall. "Why'd it have to be you?!"

"I don't know," Shidou says honestly. "I wish I did."

Ugly tears roll down Sae's face as his breathing shudders. Shidou had never seen him cry like this before- had never seen him cry, period. Maybe he's finally broken the former genius. Out of all his loops, this is by far the worst one. He doesn't know what to do, doesn't know how to handle this.

The easy thing to do would be to walk out and let the loop reset.

Instead, Shidou kneels next to Sae. Because every version of him was worth saving, even the ones that were doomed to fail. He tentatively rests a hand on the small of Sae's back, and Sae releases another shuddering sob and leans into him, desperately gripping at the fabric of his shirt.

"I'm right here, Sae," he whispers, rubbing gentle circles into his back as Sae cries into his chest. "I'm not walking away."

"Please," Sae begs, shaking under his touch. "Please, Ryusei. Make it stop."

"I'm trying to," Shidou promises, moving his free hand to lightly stroke Sae's hair. "I'll get it right one of these times, Sae. I promise."

Once Sae's sobs trail off into sharp breaths, Shidou manages to coax him back inside the apartment. He helps Sae to his bed, where the former genius immediately curls in on himself and stares blankly at the wall.

Sae is obviously ashamed of his outburst because he refuses to acknowledge Shidou at all, just lays there like a corpse all day. Still, Shidou doesn't leave. There might be a wall between them in this loop, but Shidou's not going to take the easy way out and abandon him.

At one point, Shidou tries to get him to eat. Sae doesn't react at all.

Aiku's phone call comes, and Shidou ignores it.

And so the day crawls to an end. Shidou isn't sure what else he can do besides just stay. Sae is clearly closed off to him and seems to be in a worse state than before. Shidou had never seen him like this in any loop- just a husk of himself, a body that may as well be dead.

It's close to midnight. Sae is still lying there, hunched tightly in on himself. He hasn't moved a muscle. He looks so miserable it makes Shidou want to take him by the shoulders and shake him until he gets a reaction.

"Sae," he whispers into the darkness of the room. "It's okay. It'll be over in just a few minutes."

Sae doesn't respond.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do more for you," Shidou murmurs. "I know as soon as I leave, you'll throw yourself off that balcony. And as much as I'd love to stay by your side twenty-four-seven... that's not going to help you. Not really."

Still, silence.

"I'm going to help you, Sae," Shidou swears. "I promise you. I'm going to figure out whatever this is and show you a reason to keep going."

Sae finally gives a dry chuckle at that, and it's a terrible, grating sound.

"I'm sorry you ever met me, Ryusei," he says.

"And I'm sorry you feel that way."

11:59. Shidou takes in a deep breath and closes his eyes. It would be over soon, and then he could make good on his promise to this husk of Sae.

12:00 AM.

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November 11th. 7:23 AM.

They're sitting in the cafe, Sae with his black coffee, staring out the window.

"You never eat," Shidou says in realization. "You only take a bite at the roller rink, and when we order takeout you barely touch your plate."

"What?" Sae's brows furrow. "You're talking nonsense."

"Why don't you ever eat?"

"I'm just... I'm not hungry." Sae exhales. "I'm not going to order food just to waste it."

"You must get hungry at some point, though."

"I haven't been hungry in a while."

"You should eat, even if you don't feel hungry. Food keeps your strength up."

"And what do I need strength for, anyway?"

Shidou considers this. "Keeping up with me," he says finally.

Sae snorts. "I can do that just fine."

"Can you now?" Shidou wiggles his brows, and Sae scowls. "C'mon, Sae-chan, just have a bite of mine. Please?"

"I'm not sharing your food," Sae's scowl deepens. "Just leave it alone."

"Fine," Shidou relents, seeing it's a pointless battle. "Maybe later."

"Sure." The word is empty.

Roller skating. Mini golfing. Ignoring Aiku's call. This seems to be a good pattern. It warms Sae up to him, gets them closer than they were before. But what next? The art route? Tattoos again? Something new?

An idea lights up in his head. "Let's go to the beach," he suggests as Sae taps his foot, looking off into the distance.

"The beach?" Sae scoffs. "In this weather?"

"We'll get a nice sea breeze!" Shidou chirps. "C'mon, it'll be nice to just chill and walk a bit."

"Sure," Sae relents. "Whatever you want to do."

Sae drives them to the closest beach. It's much chillier by the water, and Sae huddles up in his jacket, shoulders hunched. Shidou doesn't mind the cold. The two walk along the shore, feeling the wind in their hair. Sae's cheeks are flushed red from the chill.

"Ooh, ooh, a seashell!" Shidou bends down and holds it up for Sae to examine. It's a pretty large shell, tinted pink. "I wonder how many we can find!"

"Probably a lot," Sae says dully. "Given we're on a beach."

"I'll find you the prettiest shell there is, Sae-chan," Shidou promises.

Sae snorts. "I'll be the judge of that."

They continue their walk, Shidou occasionally bending down to pick up another shell. At one point, Sae abruptly stops, leaning over the water and fishing through it only to pull up the item that had caught his attention.

"A conch shell," he says quietly, offering it to Shidou.

Shidou's eyes widen. "Whoaa!" he cheers, full of excitement. "That's a legendary pull, Sae-chan! You must be real lucky!"

"I think you're just my good luck charm," Sae murmurs, gaze dropping. "Good things happen when you're around."

Shidou closes his hands around Sae's and the shell. "Hold onto it, Sae," he says, "It was meant for you."

Sae scoffs. "It's just a shell." But he tucks it into his coat pocket, safe and sound.

Finally, Shidou spots what he'd wanted to find in coming here. "Lookie, Sae-chan!" he grabs Sae's arm, pointing ahead. "Seagulls!"

Sure enough, there's a handful of gulls parked by the water, sifting through the sand. Shidou spreads his arms and caws loudly at them, but they don't regard him with a response. Sae puts a fist to his mouth to poorly stifle a chuckle, glancing over at Shidou.

"They're my favorite animal," he says offhandedly.

"I know," Shidou replies. "That's why I brought you here."

"How did you..."

"Uh, Rin must've told me," Shidou lies. "They're cute, aren't they? Wouldn't it be nice to just... fly away?" He's testing the waters, looking for a response.

"Yeah," Sae breathes, gaze fixed on the gulls. "It would."

"Where would you fly to, Sae-chan? If you could."

"I don't know," Sae says. "Somewhere far away."

"Back to Spain?"

"No," Sae frowns. "Just... somewhere that's not here. Maybe to the moon."

"The moon," Shidou echoes. "We can be astronauts!"

"We?" Sae says wryly.

"Well, yeah! I'd come with you. Can't send you off alone, can I?"

Sae shakes his head. "You wouldn't want to come," he says, "It wouldn't be fun like this all the time."

"What would it be like, then?"

"It would be... quiet." Sae exhales, eyes drifting out over the water. "Most days, I don't get out of bed."

"What about today?"

"I guess we'll never know, will we?"

I know . "You didn't have any plans today?"

"I had one," Sae returns.

"What was it?"

"It's... not relevant. I think I'll have to reschedule."

"I had soccer practice," Shidou says.

Sae's eyes widen slightly. "You skipped practice for me?"

"You seemed like you needed me more," Shidou offers.

"And how would you know that?"

"Call it a demon's intuition," he winks. "...what were you planning to do today, Sae?"

"Didn't I already say it doesn't matter?"

Shidou feels like he's grasping at straws. How does he get to the point without setting Sae off? "What do I have to do to get you to be honest with me?" he questions finally.

Sae blinks in surprise, glancing over at him. "I don't..." Then he says in a small voice, "Do you ever feel like the world is too big for you?"

"No," Shidou replies, "But I feel too big for the world, sometimes."

"Then maybe you'll understand," Sae says softly. "How pointless it all feels. I just... it's hard to put into words."

"Try me. I'm listening."

"I feel... trapped, I guess. Inside my own skin." Sae bites his lip. "I wish there was a way to start over. To learn from your mistakes and try again."

I know about that all too well . "What would you do differently?" Shidou asks. "If you could go back."

"I'd be a better brother," Sae mumbles. "I'd be a better son. I wouldn't have... left you."

"You broke my heart, Sae," Shidou says honestly. "I've never been able to get you out of my head, even after all this time."

"I know." Sae reaches up to swipe at his eyes. "I *know* . I didn't want to do it. I wanted to wait."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I just couldn't," Sae gasps out, and Shidou realizes he's crying. "I saw a glimpse of a future where I was happy, and I couldn't take it. I ran the other way, and I hurt you in doing so. You

deserved so much better, Ryusei. I thought- no, I *knew* I couldn't give that to you."

Shidou tentatively reaches out a hand, moving Sae's hands away to cup his face and gently swipe at his tears with his thumbs. Sae won't look at him, gaze burning a hole in the sand.

"And why do you think that, Sae?"

"Because I'm fundamentally unloveable," Sae says, voice barely a whisper. "I was born without a heart."

"That's not true at all," Shidou says fiercely. "Why in the world would you ever think that?!"

"Because it's all I've ever experienced in my life!" Sae cries. His lovely turquoise eyes glint with tears. "I ruin things, Ryusei! I break them! I break *people* . Every time I make a decision, it's always the wrong one. It's like I'm cursed."

"You're not cursed, Sae."

"How can you look at me and say that?!" Sae exclaims. "After what I did to you? I fuck everything up, Ryusei! You said it yourself- I broke your heart. That's what I do. That's all I'm capable of doing!"

"Sae..." Shidou cuts himself off. What is he supposed to say? He's no therapist. How is he supposed to comfort someone who's never experienced comfort a day in their life?

"Forget it," Sae mutters, sniffing. "Just forget it, Ryusei."

"No, I'm not-" Shidou shakes his head. "Sae, do you know the reason why you hurt me so bad?"

"Why?" Sae scoffs.

"Because I loved you," Shidou says, "In the brief time I knew you, you gave me life, Sae. You set me free. You showed me a world where I wasn't too much for everyone, a world where I could have the freedom I craved so badly. I felt like I hadn't been living until I met you. You'll never understand how much it meant to me that you looked over everyone at Blue Lock and said it's him I want. I want Ryusei Shidou. You chose me, and I've never been the same."

"Ryusei," Sae breathes.

"That doesn't sound like you breaking something, Sae. It sounds like you created something beautiful."

" *Beautiful* and *me* don't go hand in hand," Sae mumbles.

"How can you even say that?" Shidou asks with sincerity. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Sae throws his arms around Shidou with a raw sob, pulling him close and burying his face in the crook of his neck. Shidou is taken aback, not expecting the gesture, but is quick to reciprocate. His arms snake around Sae, rubbing gentle circles into his back and holding him close.

"I miss playing soccer with you," Sae says against his skin. "You made me feel like I was someone worth loving."

"You are, Sae," Shidou insists, his grip tightening. "You've always been worth loving."

"I threw away everything," Sae continues shakily. "I thought I didn't deserve any of it. I don't deserve to be happy."

"Is that why you quit soccer?"

A tiny nod.

"Would you play again?" Shidou asks quietly. "If you could?"

"I don't know," Sae croaks. "I just don't see a point anymore. I used to want to be the best. Now I'm just so tired."

"What if you just... played because you wanted to?" Shidou suggests. "Not because you have to be anything. Just... for fun."

"For fun?" Sae sniffs, incredulous. "I haven't done anything for fun in years."

"We did things for fun today."

"We did." Sae's lips curl into a small smile, and Shidou feels it on his skin. "I did have fun today." The smile drops. "But everything good comes to an end."

"What if it doesn't have to?"

"How?"

"What if you stayed?" Shidou dares to ask. "What if we... worked on this?"

"What, me and you?"

"No. You, Sae. Whatever is going on with you. You're clearly hurting. You're not well. You need help."

"And what if I don't want help?"

"I'm offering it anyway."

Sae pulls back, and there's a sad look in his eyes. "You're a good friend, Ryusei," he murmurs. "You're a good person. Don't waste your efforts on someone like me."

"What if I could convince you?" Shidou questions. "Convince you to try?"

"Good luck with that," Sae says wearily. "I have nothing left, Ryusei. It was always going to end like this."

"I understand now, Sae," Shidou says. "I finally understand you. I'm going to think of something, and then I'll change your mind."

Sae tilts his head with a worn smile, ocean breeze ruffling his hair. "Thank you for everything, Ryusei. I had a good day today."

"Is this where you leave me?"

"Yes."

"There's no way I can convince you to let me come with?"

"No. I'm sorry. You've done too much already."

"...are you going to jump?"

Something flickers in Sae's gaze. "...not today," he says finally.

"Do you promise?"

"I promise."

"Can we be friends, Sae?"

Sae chuckles, eyes briefly closing. "If you'll have me, I'd be honored to be your friend, Ryusei Shidou."

"Keep in touch?"

"...I'll text you tomorrow."

"Bye-bye, Sae-chan," Shidou exhales. "I'll get to thinking."

Sae dips his head and turns away. He only makes it a few steps before he glances back and says, "I have to drive you back."

Shidou laughs at that, and Sae does too. What a beautiful sound that is indeed.

-*-

November 11th. 7:23 AM.

Ryusei Shidou turns up at Sae Itoshi's door.

"Come to soccer practice with me," he says before Sae can get a single word out.

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry. Can I come in?"

" *No* ," Sae says, but Shidou is already pushing his way in anyhow.

He observes the apartment with all its boxes strewn about. "Come watch me play," he insists.

"Why the hell would I do that?" Sae demands. "You just- just broke into my apartment, and I haven't seen you in three years! Who do you think you are?!"

"Ryusei Shidou," he says with a wink, "And I'm here to show you what you're missing."

"Oh my god." Sae drags a hand through his hair. "Get *out* . Before I call the police."

"Please, please, please!" Shidou begs, clasping his hands together. "I'll literally never ask you for anything ever again. Come to practice with me, and I'll make it worth your while. I promise."

"Worth my while?" Sae's nose wrinkled. "I don't play anymore."

"I know. I'm going to change your mind about that."

Sae scoffs, incredulous. "You are so full of it. Nothing is changing my mind about anything."

"Oh, I'll change your mind about this," Shidou challenges with a grin. "Why, scared I might?"

"No."

"Then come with me. Prove me wrong."

"I don't have to prove anything to you."

"C'mon, Sae-chan," Shidou purrs. "For old time's sake?"

"...fine!" Sae snaps, crossing his arms. "Only if it gets you out of my life faster."

Shidou's grin widens. "We have a bit of time to kill," he says, "How about we get breakfast?"

"No," Sae retorts, "Absolutely not."

"Come on, lemme treat you," Shidou says. "You look like you could use it."

"And what's *that* supposed to mean?!" Sae is immediately on the defensive, hackles rising.

"It means you look like you could use a friend," Shidou offers, and Sae seems taken aback. "You must be really tired, Sae."

Something in Sae's gaze shifts, and he huffs out, "Fine. But *only* to get you out of my hair."

"What's your favorite breakfast spot?" Shidou asks, leaning against the kitchen counter.

"Don't have one."

"What do you feel like eating?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Ughh, you're so difficult," Shidou whines. "Okay, do you prefer sweet or savory?"

"...usually savory," Sae grumbles, "But today I wouldn't mind sweet."

Shidou takes him to a pancake house and doesn't let Sae look at the menu. "I'm going to order you something," Shidou says, "It'll be a surprise!"

"I said I'm not-"

"Hungry, I know, but just humor me, okay?" Shidou pleads, scanning the menu up and down. "A little sweet treat never hurt anyone."

The waiter comes by their table with a black coffee and a water. Shidou embarrasses Sae by whispering their order in her ear. As she walks off, Sae huffs, staring down into his coffee.

"You've always been insufferable," he says shortly.

"Don't you love the theatrics?" Shidou teases. Sae doesn't respond.

Their food arrives- a stack of strawberry chocolate chip pancakes drizzled with chocolate sauce, syrup, and topped with whipped cream. Shidou beams in delight and immediately begins distributing the order between him and Sae, pushing Sae's plate in front of him.

"Doesn't it look yummy?" he urges. "Try a bite, Sae-chan!"

Sae wrinkles his nose. "I'm-"

"Please, Sae-chan," Shidou clasps his hands together. "...I know you haven't been eating. Maybe you just need something to get your appetite back. C'mon, it's more dessert than food anyway."

"I..." Sae trails off. "What do you know?"

"A lot more than you think I do."

"Have you been stalking me?"

"Unfortunately, no," Shidou gives a wistful sigh.

Sae frowns, but picks up his fork. "Fine. I'll have a bite if it shuts you up. Your begging is lukewarm."

Shidou stifles a cheer at the small victory. He watches, carefully, as Sae cuts off a piece of pancake and sticks it in his mouth. He chews, slowly and deliberately, before swallowing.

"Do you like it?" Shidou questions.

"...it's sweet. Very sweet."

"That's good, right?"

In response, Sae glowers, but takes another bite. Shidou's resulting smile is wide and genuine.

Sae only eats half his pancake, but it's more than usual, so Shidou takes it. Shidou, for his part, devours the other pancakes like a starving man. It's probably not good to eat this much sugar before practice, but oh well. Sacrifices must be made.

"Did someone put you up to this?" Sae asks.

Shidou blinks, taken aback. He'd never been asked that before. "No," he replies, then adds, "Well, the universe did, I guess."

"Really? Rin isn't involved?" Sae sounds suspicious.

"Nah, not at all." Shidou waves his fork in a vague gesture. "This is all me, Sae-chan."

"Then why?" Sae's brows furrow. "I don't understand. You show up out of nowhere and drag me out- why?"

"It's like I said," Shidou says. "You seem like you could use a friend."

"And what makes you think that?"

"You told me."

Sae snorts. "When the hell did I say that?"

"In a dream."

The former genius shakes his head. "A *dream* ?"

"It's something like a dream, anyway," Shidou amends. "I don't know. Maybe I just wanted to see you."

"After all this time?"

"After all this time."

Shidou picks up the check. He pays, and then they head out. Sae is nursing a to-go cup of black coffee, hands folded around it as if seeking warmth.

"Would it have been a bad thing?" Shidou asks. "If Rin had put me up to it."

Sae purses his lip. "I don't know. It wouldn't make any sense."

"Why not?"

"We haven't spoken in a very long time." Abruptly, Sae stops walking. "God, what am I doing? I can't go to your practice. Rin will be there."

"Hey, hey!" Shidou frets. "It'll be okay. We can, uh, put you in a disguise."

"A *disguise* ?"

"Yeah! Come back to my place, I'll dress you up. Like a makeover episode!"

"Absolutely not."

They end up at Shidou's apartment, Shidou rifling through his closet for a proper disguise. Sae stands awkwardly in the doorway to his bedroom, a frown on his face.

"This is so stupid," the former genius grumbles.

"Aha!" Shidou holds up a hot pink hoodie. "Whatcha think?"

"No. Immediately, no."

"You can pull the hood up and no one will see your hair!"

"It's not happening, Ryusei."

It happens. Sae ends up in the hoodie, a baseball cap on top of the hood, a pair of rhinestone sunglasses, and a leopard print face mask. Shidou admires his handiwork, posing Sae in front of the mirror, while Sae stands like a zombie, out of place.

"I hate it," Sae says. "No, this is not happening. I'm taking it off."

"Aw, man," Shidou sighs. "And here I thought I was a professional stylist."

"I'd rather Rin just see me than wear this," Sae huffs. "I feel like a clown."

He shucks off the hoodie, and Shidou can't help but admire his sleek waist and abs. Silently, of course. This loop of Sae would probably tear his head off if he voiced any of those thoughts.

Sae returns to his turtleneck, the rest of the disguise forgotten on Shidou's bed. He frowns at himself in the mirror, as if he's still not happy with what he's seeing, then turns away.

"Are you sure it's alright if I come?" he asks hesitantly. "I don't want to encroach."

"Of course it's fine! I wouldn't have invited you if it wasn't."

"...Rin will be fine seeing me?"

"No promises," Shidou admits, and Sae's face takes on a scowl. "But seriously, it'll be fine! I'm sure Rin misses you."

"Doubtful," Sae mumbles.

"Why wouldn't he?"

"All I've ever done is push him away. In what world would he be happy to see me?"

"Maybe this world is a lot different than you think it is, Sae," Shidou says quietly. "Maybe there's a lot of love waiting for you if you'd just be willing to see it."

Sae tenses visibly, turning his head. "You're always spouting nonsense."

"I'm gonna make you believe it, Sae-chan. Just you wait."

They're a little early, but Shidou figures early is better than late. They drive to the practice facility, Sae parking the car a bit away. Shidou climbs out, slinging his duffel bag over his shoulder.

"I've gotta hit the locker room and change," he says. "You wanna come with?"

"I'm not about to be left alone here," Sae snaps.

They enter the building. It doesn't seem like anyone's here yet, the locker room quiet and empty. Shidou exchanges his clothes for his uniform while Sae idly stands by, observing the room. As Shidou pops a squat down on a bench to lace up his cleats, Sae finally speaks.

"It's been a while," he says. "Since I've been in one of these."

"Bringing back memories?"

"A few," Sae murmurs. "I remember being ready to walk away from a game because I didn't see a point in it."

"Did you?" Shidou asks curiously.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you were there," Sae says. "A demon ready to spread his wings. You were worth staying for."

The U20 match. Shidou remembers it like it was yesterday. The first (and last) time he'd ever played with Sae Itoshi, the buzzing of his cells, the chemistry between them... No soccer he'd played since had ever matched that feeling.

"Was it hard to quit?" Shidou questions.

"It was harder to keep playing."

"Do you regret it?"

"I don't know. I had no reason left to play. What was the point?"

"I'll show you the point, Sae." Shidou gets to his feet and stretches, cracking his neck. "I'll show you this demon hasn't yet lost his wings, and neither have you."

He throws his duffel bag into a locker, then the two head out onto the field. Their coach is there already, and he seems shocked when he sees Sae. To be fair, it's probably a big surprise seeing the Sae Itoshi after all this time.

"Hey coach!" Shidou says, easygoing. "Hope you don't mind I brought a spectator."

"Well- no, that's perfectly fine," their coach blinks a few times, as if still registering Sae's presence. "It's nice to have you, Mr. Itoshi."

Sae doesn't reply, just gazes across the field with an almost wistful look in his eyes.

The other players begin filing in soon- there's Aiku, Sendou, Reo and Nagi, Hiori, Isagi, Bachira, and finally Rin. No one acknowledges Sae besides a few confused glances until Rin, who immediately seizes Shidou by the arm and drags him a few feet away.

"What the fuck," he hisses, "Is *he* doing here?"

"Why do you assume this is my fault?!"

"I know it is! Who else would be able to charm my brother into coming to soccer practice?"

"Okay, I didn't charm him," Shidou says, "I begged. Really nicely."

"So it was you!"

"Just- calm down, okay?" Shidou holds up his hands in surrender. "He's not doing so good, Rinrin. It's a good thing that he's here."

"A good thing for who? *You* ?"

"A good thing for all of us," Shidou responds. "But mostly Sae. Come on, please just let it go. Try to play nice?"

"Why should I have to play nice after everything he's done?!"

"Trust me, I get it," Shidou says. "Just ignore him if you have to. But please don't start anything, Rin."

"Fine!" Rin huffs, crossing his arms. "Fine. Only because I have better things to worry about."

Shidou can't help but chuckle at how similar the two brothers were.

Warmups start. Sae sits on the bench and silently watches. Shidou feels his gaze burning on him.

"Is anyone else freaking out over Sae Itoshi being here?" Isagi whispers as they stretch.

"Shidou decided to bring a plus one," Rin says sourly.

"Alright, enough about Sae Itoshi," Aiku steps in. "Let's all focus up. Don't get distracted. I'm looking at you, Shidou."

"Why me?!"

Stretches finish, and the team begins some basic drills. Shidou's eyes keep wandering to Sae over on the bench. The former genius' eyes track his every movement, and Shidou feels spurred on by it. After a passing drill finishes, their coach calls everyone to line up.

"We'll be doing a scrimmage today," he says. "Divide into two teams."

Rin and Shidou end up on opposite teams. Isagi goes with Rin, of course, and Bachira goes with Isagi, of double course. Kickoff starts, then Shidou is sprinting down the field, heart pounding in time with his footsteps. He never feels more alive than when he's on the field; it's like he truly has sprouted wings.

He passes, receives, dribbles, and shoots. The score is kept tight, almost neck and neck, but Shidou is having fun. There's a freedom he can't find anywhere else than in soccer, and he hopes that he can convey that to Sae, observing their match closely.

The scrimmage ends 4-5 in Rin's favor. Shidou slings an arm around his shoulder and tells him good job, and Rin tries to shrug him off but fails. Everyone is chattering excitedly, recounting the match and going over things they could have done better.

Practice ends with a team huddle, then it's over. Shidou jogs over to the bleachers to grab his water bottle from next to Sae. He takes a long gulp, feeling Sae's eyes on him, then sets it down.

"So?" Shidou asks. "What did you think?"

"...you looked like you were having fun," is what Sae says.

"I was. Soccer is fun for me."

"It used to be fun. A long, long time ago." Sae's shoulders hunch.

"Maybe it can be fun again," Shidou says.

They're interrupted by a new presence joining them, and Shidou's eyes widen as he sees Rin coming to stand in front of them. *Shit,* he thinks, *Don't fuck this up, don't fuck this up-*

"Sae," Rin says shortly.

Shidou doesn't miss the way Sae shrinks in on himself. "...Rin," he replies, carefully.

Rin doesn't say anything for a moment, just scrutinizes him. Finally, he says, "Why are you here?"

"Ryusei invited me."

"I know. That doesn't explain anything."

"That's it. That's all there is to it."

Rin huffs. "You weren't going to say hi to me?"

"I-"

"It's been years, Sae," Rin says, "It's like I don't even exist to you anymore."

Sae looks utterly defeated. His gaze lowers to the ground, and he says, "I know. I've just been... tired."

Rin pauses then, and he looks almost conflicted. Awkwardly, he mumbles, "You don't look well."

Sae blinks.

"Have you been eating?" Rin asks.

"...sometimes."

"...Shidou said you're not doing good," Rin grumbles. "Whatever's going on, sort it out. I don't like seeing you like this."

Sae blinks again. Then he breathes, "Okay."

Rin gives another huff, then turns and stalks off. Shidou absolutely had not been expecting that. But from the look on Sae's face, Shidou would dare say it may have been beneficial to his plan.

"You wanna get out of here?" he asks, nudging Sae's foot with his own.

Sae still seems stunned, but he rejoins reality at the touch. "...sure," he says, getting to his feet. "Why did you tell him I'm not doing good?"

"It's the truth, isn't it?"

Sae doesn't answer.

"Hey, wanna stick with me a little longer?" Shidou ventures. "I wanna show you some more fun."

"Really?" Sae scoffs. "...why?"

"Isn't that what friends are for?"

"You're not my friend."

"I could be, if you gave me a chance."

Sae shoves his hands into the pockets of his jacket. "Fine. Why not? I don't have anything better to do. And... it hasn't been all bad so far."

Shidou's face splits into a grin. "Alright, Sae-chan. Let's get this one right."

i'll catch you when you fall

Chapter Notes

> i survived my finals HOORAY! I actually wrote one of my final papers about the Itoshi brothers and interpersonal conflict. love inflicting my autism onto my professors
>
> enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shidou takes Sae to an ice rink.

Sae's brows furrow as they approach the building. "What are we doing here?"

"You skate, don't you?"

Sae seems surprised. "...a little," he says cautiously. "How do you know?"

"Maybe Rin mentioned it." Shidou gives an innocent shrug. "C'mon, you like skating, right?"

"It's alright."

"I've been rollerblading a lot recently," Shidou says. "But I've never been on the ice. Apparently, they're pretty different."

"They sure are," Sae gives a small snort.

"You'll have to teach me then, Sae-chan!"

Sae wrinkles his nose. "Let's see how you do."

They rent their skates, lace them up, and then Shidou leads Sae out onto the rink. His first step on the ice is wobbly, and he immediately clutches the side wall for support. Well, now he knows how Sae felt every time they went rollerblading.

Sae, for his part, easily glides out onto the ice. Glancing back at Shidou, the corners of his mouth curl upward in amusement. "It can't be that bad."

"I feel like it's my first day learning to walk," Shidou complains. The blades on his feet make him feel unsteady, and to be honest, he really doesn't want to slip and end up on his ass.

"You didn't drag me all the way out here to cling to the wall the whole time." Sae skates up beside him, holding out a hand. "Come on." His words are clipped, but still... It's an olive branch, the hand outstretched. Shidou would be a fool not to take it.

Enveloping Sae's hand in his own, Shidou allows himself to be carefully pried off the wall. He stumbles a bit, grabbing onto Sae's arm for support, to which the former genius releases an indignant noise.

"Don't pull me down with you!" he exclaims.

"I don't wanna fall," Shidou whines.

"Falling is part of it," Sae tells him. "Sometimes, you have to fall to be able to stand back up again. If you never fall, what do you learn?"

If you never fall .

"Now let go and stand on your own." Sae pulls away from him, leaving Shidou on his own two wobbly legs. Shidou takes a step forward, then another, allowing the momentum built to let him glide. Another step-

Then he slips, falling backward and hitting the ice.

"Owww!" he complains loudly, and Sae shakes his head. "Okay, I fell. Am I an expert now?"

"Try a few more times," Sae says, a ghost of a smile across his features. "Something tells me you'll be fine."

He helps him back up. Sae's hands are cold, much like the chill in the rink. Shidou's, in contrast, are always warm. Sae pulls back again, once more leaving him to fend for himself.

"You're a cruel teacher," Shidou grumbles.

"You won't learn anything if I coddle you."

"But it would make me feel better," Shidou bats his eyelashes.

Sae lets out a long exhale. "It's like... walking. Just bend your knees. Feel the momentum. And... glide." As he speaks, he takes a few steps, spinning a circle around Shidou. "Gravity isn't your enemy. It'll get you where you need to go."

Shidou pushes off the ice, making it a couple of inches before coming to an awkward halt. "You make it look so easy," he says.

Something flashes in Sae's eyes. "I make a lot of things look easy. The truth is, most things are hard. Almost everything in this world is hard."

"Yeah, but hard things are worth doing, aren't they?" Shidou dares to ask.

"...only rarely."

"Learning to skate will be worth it if it means I can keep up with you."

"Oh, you think you can keep up with me?" Sae raises a brow. "Is that a challenge?"

"Oh, no, please go easy on me," Shidou begs, but he's already taking off across the rink.

Shidou watches as he effortlessly glides over the ice, graceful in his every step. He's the very picture of elegance, everything right in the world. Sae is balance and he is harmony. Sae skates the ice like he was born on it.

But Shidou isn't one to back down from a challenge. He starts after him on wobbly legs, though the more he steps, the more adjusted he becomes. His pace is awkward and slow, but eventually he makes it to the end of the rink where Sae is waiting, the race won.

"That was just unfair," he complains. "I wasn't ready."

"The only way you'd be ready was if I left you," Sae says, matter-of-fact. "Then you could stand on your own two legs and learn something."

"And what was I supposed to learn?"

Sae hesitates. "That if you want something, you need to chase after it."

"What if that something doesn't want to be chased?"

"I think it does," Sae says quietly. "It's just never been chased after before, so it dances out of reach."

"Maybe I can finally catch it." Shidou's gaze holds both a challenge and a question.

"...maybe," Sae breathes. "But maybe it doesn't deserve to be caught."

"I think that's up to the person chasing it, isn't it?"

"Maybe the person chasing it doesn't know what they really want."

"I always know damn sure what I want," Shidou says, a sly grin spreading across his lips. "And I've never been wrong before."

Sae seems to shake himself then, turning away. "Then try to keep up," he says over his shoulder. "Maybe you'll learn something after all."

They skate for about an hour, and sure enough, Shidou does pick up on it. He's nowhere near Sae's skill, but he can at least trail after the former genius like a lost dog.

"What is it about skating that you like?" Shidou asks as they sit on the bench, taking off their skates.

Sae finishes undoing his laces. "It just feels... freeing," he returns. "Like I can spread wings and fly away."

"So did you feel it? Free?"

"If only for a moment," Sae says.

"The only time I feel free is when I'm on the field," Shidou muses. "Soccer is unlike anything else."

"Yeah," Sae echoes in a whisper. "It really is."

"Do you ever feel like the world is too big for you?"

Sae blinks, clearly surprised. "...yes," he says softly. "All the time."

"I feel the opposite. Like I'm too big for the world." Shidou remembers the conversation from the earlier loop on the beach. "At least, until I met you."

"Me?" Sae scoffs. "And what did I do?"

"You gave me freedom, Sae. You freed me from my cage. For once, I didn't feel like I was too much. I felt like I was just enough. I wish I could make the world feel a little smaller for you in return."

"You did, Ryusei," Sae shocks him by saying. "You always made my world feel smaller. Like... it was something I could manage. Where I could just exist."

"...hey, I have somewhere else we can go," Shidou says. "Are you down for another stop?"

"Sure," Sae relents without protest. "I'm already here, aren't I?"

Shidou's next stop is a rage room. The employee gives them instructions, along with special goggles to protect their eyes, then shuts the door behind them. The room is fairly small, full of breakable objects and a few tools scattered across the table.

"Have you ever been to one of these?" Shidou asks, picking up a hammer in his hands and turning it over thoughtfully.

"No. I don't really feel... *rage* ."

"Well, I do," Shidou says. "A lot of it. And breaking objects is better than breaking people, so... I come here when I need to unwind. But it's not just about rage. It's about taking out whatever you're feeling on something physical. It's very therapeutic."

"I don't know," Sae says. He cautiously picks up a plate and holds it out in his hands. "I don't like breaking things. Even so, it feels like it's all I ever seem to do."

"But these things are meant to be broken," Shidou points out. "Maybe breaking something on purpose will make you feel better."

Without further preamble, he smashes the hammer down on an old television screen with a loud scream that has Sae stiffening. The screen shatters on impact, and he grins before hitting it again.

"C'mon, try it, Sae-chan," he says. "Just scream as loud as you can and break something on purpose."

Sae hesitates, then releases a strangled shout and hurls the plate at the wall. It shatters on impact, and Sae's eyes widen.

"Not bad," Shidou comments. "But I've seen better."

"You want *better* ?" Sae snaps. He picks up the next plate and throws it after the first with another cry. It shatters as well, the pieces falling uselessly onto the ground.

Shidou chucks his hammer at the tv. "People think I'm a fucking freak!" he yells at the top of his lungs.

Sae hesitates, then throws a third plate. "Everyone expects too much of me!" he shouts.

Shidou kicks the tv over onto its side. "I'm so fucking lonely!"

"I hurt everyone I love!" Sae screams, hurling a cup.

"I'm too much for everyone!" *Crash.*

"I don't deserve to be happy!" *Crash.*

"The whole world's a fucking joke!" *Crash.*

"I fuck up everything good that happens to me!" *Crash.*

"I'm terrified no one will ever understand me!" *Crash.*

"I have nothing left in the world!" *Crash.*

"At the end of the day, I'm nothing!" *Crash.*

"I don't have a human heart!" *Crash.*

"I keep fucking up these stupid choices!" *Crash.*

"I- I fucking hate myself!" *Crash.*

Shidou screams as loud as he can, and Sae does too. They shatter and break and smash everything in the room, and when there's nothing left to trample, they fall silent save for their heavy breathing. Then Shidou laughs, and when he looks up, he finds that Sae is smiling.

"What do you think?" he asks as his adrenaline fades.

"I think..." Sae pauses. "It's... strange."

"What is?"

"I think I feel..." he glances over at Shidou, then barks a sharp laugh. "Hungry. I feel hungry."

Shidou's grin widens, and he strangely feels tears prick at the corners of his eyes. "Then let's get you something to eat," he breathes.

It's around 4:00 PM when they sit down at a restaurant. Sae looks over the menu and orders. When their food arrives, he eats most of it as Shidou scarfs down his own meal.

"I'd forgotten," Sae comments after taking a sip of water.

"Forgotten what?"

"That food tastes good. Or it's supposed to, anyway. I don't think anything has tasted good in a long time."

Shidou gives an earnest smile. "Yeah," he agrees. "It sure does."

The sun is starting to set out the window. Winter meant early nights. Sae sets his fork down and looks across the table at him.

"I didn't know you felt that way," he says quietly.

"Huh?"

"Everything you said in the rage room."

Shidou releases a dry chuckle. "Well, I'm not exactly the vulnerable type," he says with a shrug. "Most people don't even think I have insecurities."

"I know what you mean," Sae murmurs. "People will look at you and assume you have everything together, even when your life is falling apart."

"Have you struggled with depression for your whole life?"

Sae seems caught off guard by the question. "I-" then he deflates, the defensive shield lowering. "I don't know. I think it started around when I was thirteen. I just kind of assumed these were things everyone felt, though. Then by the time I was old enough to realize that wasn't the case, I was just so used to it, I never bothered talking to anyone about it. I didn't want Rin to think less of me, and if the media ever got ahold of it... People are cruel, Ryusei. Opening up about mental health is sort of taboo. It's why my parents took so long to get Rin an autism diagnosis. Everyone just thinks if you ignore it, it goes away."

"Has it always been... this bad?"

"This bad?" Sae frowns, then shakes his head. "It comes in waves. It's odd. Nothing really triggers it, it just... happens. But that hopelessness, it builds inside you the longer you live. It eats you alive."

"...and I'm the first person you've ever told about it?"

"You're the first person who's ever bothered to ask," Sae returns bitterly.

"You must feel really alone," Shidou says, quiet and careful.

Sae shrugs, turning his head to look out the window. "I do it to myself," he replies. "I can't complain when all I've ever done is push people away."

"I have one last place I want to take you," Shidou decides it's now or never. "If you're up for it."

"It's getting late, Ryusei. I had a good day, but I think it's time to go."

"Please, Sae?" Shidou pleads. "One last stop. Then I'll let you go, I promise. But I can't let you walk away now."

Sae stills, then exhales. "Alright. One more stop."

"Actually, two. Can we swing by my apartment? I need to grab something."

Shidou retrieves his mystery item from his apartment, and then instructs Sae to drive to the next location. Where they end up is a park, which Sae seems a bit confused about until Shidou takes him further in to reveal the real destination: a practice soccer field within it. It's empty now, given the setting sun and the coming darkness, but Shidou imagines during the day it had been alive with kids kicking up turf and playing to their heart's content.

"What are we doing here?" Sae asks.

From his bag, Shidou retrieves his mystery item: a soccer ball. "Play a match with me, Sae-chan," he says simply.

"A match?"

"Pass to me one more time," he returns. "I think maybe then you'll remember why you started in the first place."

"I don't..." Sae hesitates, looking at the outstretched soccer ball.

"C'mon, Sae-chan," Shidou says. "One more play."

Sae is silent, but after a few agonizing moments, he takes the ball. He holds it stiffly before lowering it onto the turf, setting a foot atop it and testing the feel. As he does, Shidou takes off running down the field, glancing over his shoulder.

"Gimme a miracle pass, Sae-chan!" he shouts.

Sae locks eyes with him, then starts to dribble forward. He draws back and kicks the ball, sending it flying in an arc right where Shidou is waiting. Oh, Sae knew exactly what he'd wanted. A grin splitting his face, Shidou reels back and hits the ball in a bicycle kick right into the net with an unstoppable force.

The field is quiet.

Then Sae, with tears building in his beautiful eyes, asks, "Can we do that again?"

Shidou isn't sure how long they play. It's hard to keep track of time when he's feeling the adrenaline rush that comes with playing with Sae Itoshi. They kick the ball back and forth, making passes and scoring goals. Sae is smiling the entire time, and his energy builds as they go.

They continue until the sun is too low, painting the sky with beautiful indigos, oranges, and violets. Only then do they find themselves sitting on the bleachers, watching the rest of the sunset and catching their breath.

Sae is sitting close to him, close enough that their shoulders brush. His bangs are all messed up, and Shidou has the urge to reach out and push them back. His lips are parted in a small 'o', and his eyes are fixed ahead on the setting sun.

And then- "I was going to kill myself today," Sae murmurs.

Shidou has to do a double take. Never in a single loop had Sae ever confessed this without prompting, and rarely did he even *with* a prompt. So Shidou simply stays quiet, not wanting to fuck up whatever had driven Sae to speak.

"I was planning on it," he continues quietly. "I was going to jump off my balcony. I've tied up all my loose ends. Packed all my things away. Written a will. Everything was in place, all I needed was the courage to finally... do it. And so I thought, why not today? But then you showed up at my door."

"Yeah," Shidou breathes. "I did."

"I don't know why you did, but yes, you did," Sae says. "Once again, you wormed your way into my life. You brought me out on an adventure, and it felt like I was experiencing life again for the first time. I guess when you know you'll be dead by the end of it, everything seems new again."

"...so you're still planning on doing it?"

"That's the weird part," Sae whispers, and tears glint in his eyes. "I *was* . I really, really was. And then I made that pass to you, and... I remembered. I remembered why I stayed alive this long in the first place." His voice catches, and he croaks out, "And now I have the strangest feeling that if I just reach out, I can find it again. That reason."

"And what's the reason, do you think?"

"That somehow, even though I don't deserve it, I have a life to live at all," Sae gasps out, and the tears begin to fall down his cheeks. "That despite everything, I'm here to experience it. And sometimes... Oh, Ryusei, sometimes I want to *live* ."

"I know, Sae, I know," Shidou murmurs, and Sae breaks into a sob before collapsing against him. Shidou captures Sae in a tight hug, holding the genius against him as he cries into his jacket.

"I want to live," Sae gasps, "I want to live. I want to see the good things. I want to experience them. I want to play soccer again. I want to play soccer with you. It's just so, so hard."

"I know it is," Shidou soothes, rubbing circles into his back. "I won't pretend like it's not. But you deserve everything good in this world, Sae. By God, I'll give it to you."

"I hurt you," Sae sobs. "I don't deserve your forgiveness."

"I forgave you a good few loops ago, Sae," Shidou mumbles into his hair. "I know. Whatever you're thinking, I know it already. Trust me."

"I should have-"

"I know. *I know* ."

Sae cries harder, raw and burdened tears. He sinks against him, and Shidou holds him like he's never going to let go.

"I've already ruined everything," Sae whispers. "I threw it all away. How can I go back?"

"We'll rebuild it, Sae. Any soccer team would be lucky to have you. Wherever you go, I'll be right there with you."

"What if it doesn't work? What if I end up right back here?"

"How do you know until you try?" Shidou asks. "If you want something, you need to chase after it, remember? And this time, you won't be alone."

"I'm scared, Ryusei. I'm scared to try again."

"And that's okay. But I'm right here, Sae. I'll catch you when you fall every time. I promise."

"It just seems so impossible."

"I know, Sae. But give it time. You might be pleasantly surprised."

"...and if I do decide?" Sae breathes. "To live? What happens then?"

"Then we take it one step at a time," Shidou reassures, "And we figure it out."

They stay like that until Sae's tears and trembling subside. Shidou carefully pulls away then, only to gently swipe at Sae's eyes with his thumbs and brush away the last of his tears.

"It's cold," Sae says, like he's only just noticed. He releases a small, watery laugh. "Wow. It's *cold* ."

"You wanna get out of here?"

"Yeah," Sae agrees with a wobbly smile. "I do."

They drive back to Shidou's apartment. The radio plays an upbeat tune. Sae stares out the window at the stars like he's seeing them for the first time.

That night, they curl up together in Shidou's bed. Sae is tucked against him, feeding off his body heat. Shidou holds him close. The genius falls asleep fast, which is fair given the long day he's had. He breathes gently at Shidou's side, a sure and steady sign that he's alive.

Shidou lays awake for a while, staring up at the ceiling. With one hand, he idly strokes Sae's hair. Had it been enough? Had he given Sae the revelation he needed to stay alive? He thinks back to every other version of Sae he'd met along the way. The cold, cruel Saes, the defeated and worn Saes, the Saes he'd slowly brought back to life over the day, every Sae who had beaten him at minigolf, the Sae who'd painted him a portrait, the Sae who'd sobbed on the balcony and begged it all to go away. Each one held a piece of his heart now, no matter how short his time with them had been. But right now, his heart belonged to the Sae at his side. The Sae who still had a chance to live.

"G'night, Sae-chan," he mumbles, sleep dragging him down. "I'll see you in the morning."

Ryusei Shidou closes his eyes.

-*-

Ryusei Shidou opens his eyes. Sunlight is streaming through the curtain blinds, basking the bed in stripes of light. Groggily, he reaches for his phone, only to feel something else instead. A presence at his side, breathing softly and steadily.

Sae Itoshi.

"Holy shit," Shidou exhales, and because he still can't believe it, he checks his phone.

November 12th. 9:37 AM.

"Yes," he whispers, then repeats louder, " *Yes!* "

Beside him, Sae stirs with a small grumble at the noise.

"Sae!" Shidou exclaims, beaming down at him.

"Mm," Sae mutters.

"Sae, you're alive!"

" *Mm* ."

"We made it to the next day!"

One of Sae's eyes open, and he glowers at Shidou. "Yes, Ryusei. That is how the passage of time works."

"You have no idea how happy I am," Shidou says sincerely, "That we're here right now, Sae."

"That's what you woke me up for? To be sentimental?" Sae's nose wrinkles, but he presses closer to Shidou in silent agreement.

"I'm too excited to sit still," Shidou declares. "Wanna grab something to eat."

"...I'm not that hungry," Sae mumbles, sounding almost defeated.

"Hey, that's okay," Shidou immediately soothes. "One step at a time, Sae. Come on, let's get you out of bed."

Before they leave, Shidou sends off a text.

Ryusei Shidou: it worked, by the way

Demon Jr: ????

Ryusei Shidou: you told me to tell you how it went tomorrow

Ryusei Shidou: and it's tomorrow. Finally.

Demon Jr: tf are you talking about 😭😭😭

Demon Jr: girl literally whatever you say

Ryusei Shidou: I'll tell you later. Got smth to take care of rn

Ryusei Shidou: thanks, Charles

They end up walking to a nearby cafe. Sae is bundled up in his jacket, shielded from the cold breeze. When he exhales, he can see his breath in the air, and he follows it with his eyes. He's so startlingly pretty, Shidou thinks. Just as beautiful as the day he'd lost him.

"I never got to apologize yesterday," Sae starts quietly.

"Hey, you don't have to-"

"I'm sorry, Ryusei," Sae says, ducking his head. "I'm sorry I left you. I thought I was protecting you from me, but all I did was hurt you."

"That's okay, Sae-chan," Shidou returns readily. "I told you I forgave you already, didn't I?"

"I still wanted to say it." Sae turns to look at him, then averts his gaze again. "I... I have no right to ask you this, but... Do you think we can give *us* another chance?"

Shidou can't contain the smile that breaks out over his face. "Sae," he says, reaching over to take the genius' hand in his own. "All you had to do was ask."

"I'd like that," Sae breathes. "I'd like that a lot."

"You're not getting rid of me anytime soon," Shidou sings, bumping shoulders with him. "The universe has bound us together."

"Oh, really?" Sae snorts dryly. "The universe?"

"Yeah. Even fate doesn't want us apart." Shidou gives his hand a squeeze. "I finally caught you, Sae. I'm not going to let go."

"You say a lot of nonsense."

"But you love it."

"I do," Sae murmurs, and he leans up to plant a quick, cautious kiss on Shidou's cheek. "I missed it."

"Well, miss no longer, 'cause I'm right here." With that, Shidou chases after his lips to pull him into a real kiss. Sae melts into it with a low hum, his hands sliding to settle on Shidou's hips. Shidou could stay like this forever- kissing Sae Itoshi. It's one of the best feelings in the world.

Sae pulls away with a small breath. "I honestly don't understand how I got here," he says. "Yesterday, I thought my life was over. Today, I'm standing here with you."

"Well, it's actually a really strange story," Shidou says with a grin. "Maybe I'll tell you about it one day."

"One day?"

"Guess you'll have to stick around long enough to see it, huh?"

"You're a piece of shit," Sae says, fondness in his voice.

"I'm your piece of shit, though." He winks, and Sae rolls his eyes with the tiniest of smiles.

"So what do you have planned today?" Sae questions as they continue to walk, now hand in hand. "Surely nothing that'll beat our adventure yesterday."

"I was thinking we could start unpacking all those boxes in your apartment," Shidou replies. "Make it seem more permanent."

"...yeah. That sounds alright."

"And after that... I've got a few more adventures in mind. How do you feel about mini-golfing?"

Shidou knows even though the battle had been won, the war is far from over. If he'd learned anything from these loops, it was that Sae Itoshi wasn't easy. He was troubled, tired, and sad in ways Shidou could never imagine. Still, none of those things made Shidou want to give up. It only made him want to try harder, to show Sae a life worth living in. For the sake of every Sae he'd failed, for every Sae who didn't get to live in this moment... This Sae would.

"I want to live," Sae had told him in the soccer park. A confession made and entrusted to him. Shidou wouldn't let him down.

"I'm glad you're alive, Sae," he says earnestly, looking down at the genius beside him. What a treasure he was, and how lucky Shidou was to have him back.

Sae glances up at him with a frown, then his face softens as he sees the look in Shidou's eyes. "I think I might be too," he breathes, and Shidou can only smile wider.

Trending today:

Nothing important at all.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all so so much to everyone who's read this fic, kudoed, or left a comment. this is genuinely one of my favorite fics i've ever written, timeloops are one of my favorite tropes of all time and the topic of depression is very relevant in my life. im not sure i'll ever have this much fun writing a fic again lol. and shoutout to the one person who predicted soccer being the final missing piece to sae's recovery- i was kicking my feet like hehe they knowww

i hope something resonated with you, and if nothing else, keep living <3 sae and shidou's journey is far from over, but that's the most important first step

have a lovely day and i will inevitably see you again in this tag soon <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!